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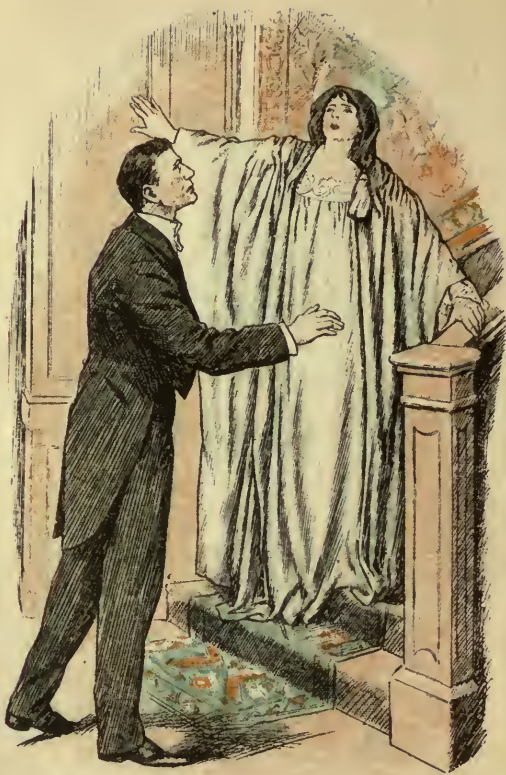


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They looked at one another for a moment.
Chapter XVI

THE WAYFARER'S LIBRARY

The
HEART OF PENELOPE



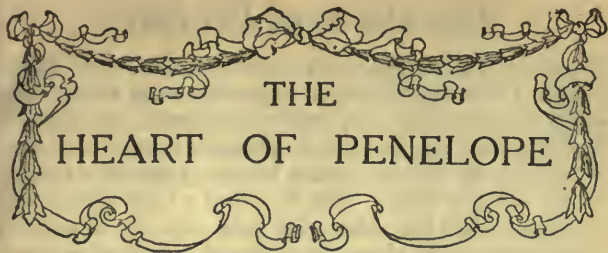
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THE HEART OF PENELOPE

CHAPTER I

' London my home is; though by hard fate sent
Into a long and irksome banishment;
Yet since call'd back, henceforward let me be,
O native country, repossess'd by thee! '

HERRICK.

I

SIR GEORGE DOWNING was back in London after an absence of twenty years from England. The circumstances which had led to his leaving his native country had been such that he could not refer to them, even in his own mind, and even after so long an interval, without an inward wincing more poignant than that which could have been brought about by the touching of any material wound.

Born to the good fortune which usually attends the young Englishman of old lineage, a fair competence and a traditional career—in his case the pleasant one of diplomacy—Downing had himself brought all his chances to utter shipwreck. Even now, looking back with the dispassionate judgment automatically produced by the long lapse of time, and greater—ah, how much greater!—knowledge of the world, he decided that fate had used him hardly.

What had really occurred was known to very few people, and these few had kept their own and his counsel to an unusual degree. The world, or rather

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that kindly and indulgent section of the world where young Downing had been regarded with liking, and even the affection, so easily bestowed on a good-looking and good-natured youngster, said to stand well with his chiefs, took a lenient view of a case of which it knew little. The fact that a lady was closely involved—further, that she was one of those fair strangers who in those days played a far greater part in diplomacy than would now be possible—lent the required touch of romance to the story. ‘A Delilah brought to judgment’ had been the comment of one grim old woman, mindful that she had been compelled to meet, if not to receive, the stormy petrel whose departure from London had been too hurried to admit of the leaving of P.P.C. cards on the large circle which had entertained, and, in a less material sense, been entertained by, her. As to her victim—only the very unkind ventured to use the word ‘tool’—his obliteration had been almost as sudden, almost as complete.

Other men, more blamed, if not more stricken, than he had been, had elected to spend their lives amid the ruins of their broken careers. More than one of his contemporaries had triumphantly lived down the memory of a more shameful record. Perhaps owing to his youth, he had followed his instinct—the natural instinct of a wounded creature which crawls away out of sight of its fellows—and now he had come back, having achieved, not only rehabilitation, but something more—the gratitude, the substantially expressed gratitude, of the most important section of his countrymen, those to whom are confided the destinies of an ever-increasing Empire.

Even in these prosaic days an Englishman living in forced or voluntary exile sometimes achieves greater things for his country than can be so much as contemplated by the men who, though backed by the power and prestige of the Foreign Office, are also tied by its

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official limitations. His efforts thus being unofficial, the failure of them can be so regarded, and diplomacy can shrug its shoulders. But if they should be successful, as Downing's had been, diplomacy, while pocketing the proceeds, is not so mean as to grudge a due reward.

Happy are those to whom substantial recognition comes ere it is too late. 'Persian' Downing, as he had, *pour cause*, come to be called, could now count himself among these fortunate few. Fate had offered him a great opportunity, which he had had the power and the intelligence to seize.

Those at home who still remembered him kindly had been eager to point out that, far from adopting American nationality, as had once been rumoured, he had known how to prove himself an Englishman of the old powerful stock, jealous of his country's honour and capable of making it respected. What was more to the purpose, from a practical point of view, was the fact that he had known how to win the confidence of a potentate little apt to be on confidential terms with the half-feared, half-despised Western.

That Downing had succeeded in maintaining his supremacy at a semi-barbaric Court, where he had first appeared in the not altogether dignified rôle of representative of an Anglo-American financial house, was chiefly due to a side of his nature, unsuspected by those who most benefited by it, which responded to the strange practical idealism of the Oriental. The terrible ordeal through which he had passed had long loosened his hold on life, bestowing upon him that calm fatalism and indifference to merely physical consequence which is ordinarily the most valuable asset of Orientals in their dealings with Western minds.

When he had accepted, or rather suggested, a Persian mission to his partner, an American banker, to whose firm an influential English friend had

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introduced him when he first turned his thoughts towards an American haven of refuge, he had done so in order to escape, if only for a few months, from a state of things brought about by what he was wont to consider the second great misfortune of his life. Downing was one of those men who seemed fated to make mistakes, and then to amaze those about them by the fashion in which they face and overcome the consequences.

Owing, perhaps, to sheer good luck, after having endured a kind of disgrace only comparable to that which may be felt by a soldier who has been proved a traitor to his cause and country, Downing had so acted that in twenty years—a few moments in a nation's diplomatic life—he had received, not only the formal rehabilitation and recognition implied by his G.C.B., but what, to tell truth, he had valued at the moment far more highly: a touching letter from the venerable statesman who had rejected his boyish appeal for mercy.

The old man had asked that he might himself convey to Downing the news of the honour bestowed on him, and he had done so in a letter full of honourable amend, of which one passage ran: 'As I grow older I have become aware of having done many things which I should have left undone; the principal of these, the one I have long most regretted, was my action concerning your case.'

Only one human being, and that a woman whose sympathy was none the less valued because she had scarcely understood all it had meant to her friend, was ever shown the letter which had so moved and softened him. But from the day he received it the thought of going home, back to England, never left him, and he would have accomplished his purpose long before, had it not been that the consequence of his second great mistake still pursued him.

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II

Attracted by a prim modesty of demeanour and apparent lack of emotion, new to him in women of his own class, and doubtless feeling acutely the terrible loneliness and strangeness attendant on his new life in such a city as was the New York of that time, George Downing had married, within a year of his arrival in America, a girl of good Puritan-Dutch stock and considerable fortune. Prudence Merryquick—her very name had first attracted him—had offered him that agreeable emotional pastime, a platonic friendship. Soon the strange relationship between them piqued and irritated him, and, manlike, he longed to stir, if not to plumb, the seemingly untroubled depths of her still nature. At first she resisted with apparent ease, and this incited him to serious skilful pursuit. Poor Prudence had no chance against a man who, in despite and in a measure because of his youth, had often played a conquering part in the mimic love warfare of an older and more subtle civilization. She surrendered, not ungracefully, and for a while it seemed as if the ex-Foreign Office clerk was like to make a successful American banker.

Their honeymoon lasted a year; then an accident, or, rather, some exigencies of business, caused them to spend a winter in Washington. There Downing's story was of course known; indeed, the newly-appointed British Minister had been a friend of his father, and one of those who had tried ineffectually to save him. This renewal of old ties brought on a terrible nostalgia. To Prudence a longing for England was incomprehensible—England had cast her husband out—indeed, she desired, with a fierceness of feeling which surprised Downing, to see him become a naturalized American, but to this he steadily refused to consent.

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As winter gave way to spring they moved even further apart from one another, and, as might have been expected, the first serious difference of opinion, too grave to call a quarrel, concerned their future home.

Downing, on the best terms with his partners, had arranged to return permanently to Washington. To his wife, a world composed of European diplomatists and cosmopolitan Americans was utterly odious and incomprehensible. She showed herself passionately intolerant of her husband's friends, especially of those who were his own countrymen and countrywomen, and she looked back with increasing longing to her early married life in New York, and to the days when George Downing had apparently desired no companionship but her own.

Both husband and wife were equally determined, equally convinced as to what was the right course to pursue, and no compromise seemed possible. But one day, quite early in the winter following that which had seen them first installed in Washington, Downing received an urgent recall to New York. With the easy philosophy which had been one of his early charms, he went unsuspectingly, but a few days after he and Prudence had once more settled down in the Dutch homestead inherited by her from Knickerbocker forebears, he came back rather sooner than had been his wont. Prudence met him at the door, for she had returned to this early habit of their married life.

'Tell me,' he said quietly and while in the act of putting down his hat, 'did you ask Mr. Fetter to arrange for my return here?'

She answered unflinchingly: 'Yes; I knew it would be best.'

He made no comment, but within a month he had gone, leaving her alone in the old house where she had spent her dreary childhood, and where she had experienced the one passionate episode of her life.

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Twice he came back—the first time with the honest intention of asking Prudence to return with him to the distant land where he had at last found a life that seemed to promise in time rehabilitation, and in any case a closer tie with his own country. Prudence hesitated, then communed with herself and with one or two trusted friends, and finally refused to accompany her husband back to Teheran. Already in her loneliness she had become interested in one of the great religious movements which swept over America at that period of its social history.

The second time that Downing returned to New York it was to make final arrangements for something tantamount to a separation. Of divorce his wife would not hear; her religious principles and theories made such a solution impossible. To his surprise and relief, she accepted the allowance he eagerly offered. 'Not in the spirit it is meant,' he said, half smiling, as they stood opposite to one another in the office of their old and much-distressed friend, Mr. Fetter; 'rather, eh, Prudence, as an offering to the Almighty on my behalf?' And she had answered quite seriously, but with the flicker of an answering smile: 'Yes, George, that is so;' and for years the two had not been so near to one another as at that moment. The arrangement was duly carried out, and in time Downing learnt that the offering foreseen by him had taken the very sensible shape of a young immigrants' home, the upkeep of which absorbed that portion of Mrs. Downing's income contributed by her husband.

Years wore themselves away, communications between the two became more and more rare, and his brief married life grew fainter and fainter in Downing's memory. Indeed, he far more often thought of and remembered trifling episodes which had taken place much earlier, even in his childhood. But the time came when this far-distant, half-forgotten woman hurt him unconsciously in his only vulnerable part.

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He learnt with a feeling of indescribable anger and annoyance that, having become closely connected with a number of English Dissenters, whose tenets she shared, she had made for some time past a yearly sojourn among them. To him the idea that his American wife should live, even for a short space of time each year, among his own countrymen and countrywomen, while he himself lingered on in outer banishment appeared monstrous, and it was one of the reasons why, even after he had already done much to effect his rehabilitation, he preferred to remain away from his own country.

At last he was urgently pressed to return home, and it was pointed out to him that his further absence was injurious to those financial interests which concerned others as well as himself. This is how it came to pass that he found himself once more in London, after an absence of twenty years. At first Downing had planned to be in England early in June, and those of his friends whose congratulations on the honour bestowed on him had been most sincere and most welcome had urged him to make a triumphal reappearance at the moment when they would all be in town. Moreover, they had promised him—and some of them were in a position to make their promises come true—such a welcome home from old and new friends as is rarely awarded to those whose victories are won on bloodless fields.

Accordingly, he had started early in May from the distant country where his exile had proved of such signal service to England. Then, to the astonishment and concern of those who considered his early return desirable, he lingered through June and half July on the Continent, ever writing, 'I am coming, I am coming,' to the few to whom he owed a real apology for thus disappointing them. To the larger number of business connections who felt aggrieved he vouchsafed no word, and left them to suppose that their

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great man, frightened by some Parisian specialist, had retired to a French spa for a cure.

III

In one minor, as in so many a major, matter Downing had been exceptionally fortunate. For many returning to their native country after long years there are none to welcome them. Those among their old friends who have not gone where no living man can hope to reach them are scattered here and there, and only affection, faithful in a sense rarely found, troubles to think of how the actual arrival of the wanderer can be made, if not pleasant, at least tolerable. But Downing found a sincere and, what was more precious, a familiar welcome, from the friend, Mr. Julius Gumberg, who had twenty years before sped him on his way with those valuable business introductions with which he had been able to build up a new career, first in America, and later in Persia.

There had been no regular correspondence between them, but now and again, sometimes after an interval of years, a short note, pregnant with shrewd counsel, and written in the tiny and only apparently clear hand which was the epistolary mode of fifty years since, would form the most welcome portion of Downing's home mail. It was characteristic of Mr. Gumberg that he sent no word of congratulation, when the man whom he still regarded as a youthful protégé received his G.C.B., the great outward mark of rehabilitation. But when he learnt that Downing had actually started for England he wrote him a line, adding by way of postscript, 'Of course you will come to me,' and of course Downing had come to him.

Mr. Julius Gumberg was one of those happy Londoners whose dwellings lie between the Green Park and that group of tranquil short streets which still remain, havens of stately peace, within a moment's

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walk of St. James's and Piccadilly. The portion of the house which looked on St. James's Place had that peculiar air of solid respectability which, in houses belonging to a certain period, seems to apologize for the rakish air of their garden-front. By its bow-windows Mr. Gumberg's house was distinguished on the park side from its more stately neighbours, and his pink blinds were so far historic that they had been noted in a guide-book some forty years before.

Small wonder that, as Mr. Gumberg's guest passed through the door into the broad low corridor which led into his old friend's library, he felt for a moment as if he were walking from the present into the past, an impression heightened by his finding everything, and almost everybody, in the house unchanged, from his host, sitting in a pleasant book-lined room where they had last parted, to the man-servant who had met him with a decorous word of welcome at the door. To be sure, both master and man looked older, but Downing felt that, while in their case the interval of time had left scarce any perceptible mark of its passage, he himself had in the same period lived, and showed that he had lived, a time incalculable.

And how did the traveller returning strike Mr. Julius Gumberg? Alas! as being in every sense quite other than the man, young, impulsive, and with a sufficient, not excessive, measure of originality, whom he had sped on his way to fairer fortunes twenty years before. Now, looking at the tall figure, the broad, slightly-bent shoulders, he saw that youth had wholly gone, that impulse had been so long curbed as to leave no trace on the rugged secretive face, to which had come, indeed, lines of concentration and purpose which had been lacking in that of the young George Downing. Originality now veered perilously near that eccentricity of outward appearance which is apt to overtake those to whom the cut of clothes, the shearing of the hair, have become of no moment.

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Mr. Gumberg's shrewd eyes had at once perceived that this no longer familiar friend looked Somebody, indeed, many would say a very great and puissant body; but the old man would have been better pleased to have welcomed home a more commonplace hero.

Mr. Gumberg's sharp ears had heard, just outside his door, quick, low interchange of words between his own faithful man-servant and the newly-arrived guest. 'Valet? No, Jackson, I have brought no man. I gave up such pleasant luxuries twenty years ago!' And Jackson had retreated, disappointed of the company of the travelled gentleman's gentleman with whom he had hoped to spend many pleasant moments.

IV

Partly in deference to his old friend's advice, Downing gave up his first morning in London to seeing those, almost to a man unknown to him, to whom he surely owed some apology for his delay. His own old world, including those faithful few friends of his youth who had wished him to return in time to add to the triumphs of the season, were already scattered, and though he had been warmly asked, even after his defection, to follow them to the downs, the moors, and the sea, he was as yet uncertain what to do. 'Waiting orders,' he had said to himself with a curious thrill of exultation as he sat in his bedroom, table and chair drawn close to the windows from which could be seen the twinkling lights of Piccadilly, and where he had been answering briefly the pile of letters he had found waiting for him.

The next morning he devoted himself to the work he had in hand, and early drove to the City in his host's old-fashioned roomy brougham. As he drove he leant back, his hat jammed down over his eyes, unwilling to see the changes which the town's aspect

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had undergone during his long absence. But there was one pang which was not spared him.

He had been among the last of those Londoners to whom the lion upon the gateway of Northumberland House had been as a Familiar, and in the long low rooms and spacious galleries to which that gateway had given access he had spent many happy hours, a youth on whom all smiled. Of course, he knew the stately palace had gone, but the sight of all that now stood in its place made him realize as nothing else had yet done how long he had been away.

But when once he found himself in the City office whither he was bound, he pushed all thoughts and recollections of the past far back into his mind, and set himself to exercise all his powers of conciliation on the men, for the most part unknown to him personally, who had the right to be annoyed with him for delaying his arrival in London so long. Long, lean, and brown, he stood before them, grimly smiling, and after the first words, 'I fear my delay has caused some of you inconvenience, gentlemen,' he plunged into the multiple complex details of the great financial interests in which he and they were bound, answering questions dealing with delicate points, and impressing them, as even the most optimistic among them had not hoped to be impressed, by his remarkable personality.

In the afternoon of the same day he made his way slowly, almost furtively, into what had once been his familiar haunts. They lay close about the house where he was now staying and at first he felt relieved, so few were the changes noted by him; but after a while he realized that this first impression was not a true one. Even in St. James's Street there was much that struck him as strange. Where he had left low houses he found huge buildings. His very boot-maker, though still flaunting the proud device, 'Established in 1767,' across his plate-glass window, was, though at the same number as of old, now merged

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in a row of shops forming the ground-floor of a red-brick edifice which seemed to dwarf the low long mass of St. James's Palace opposite.

In that square quarter-mile, bounded on the one side by Jermyn Street and on the other by Pall Mall, he missed, if not whole streets, at least many houses through whose hospitable doors he had often made his way. Then a chance turn brought him opposite the place where he had spent the last three years of his London life, and, by a curious irony, here alone time seemed to have stood still. He looked considerably at the old house, up at the narrow windows of the first-floor at which a young and happy George Downing had so often stood full of confidence in a kind world and in himself; then, following a sudden impulse, he walked across the street and rang the bell.

A buxom, powerful-looking woman opened the door; Downing recognised her at once as a certain Mary Crisp, the niece of his old landlord, and as she stood waiting for him to speak he remembered that as a girl she had not been allowed to do much of the waiting on her uncle's 'gentlemen.' There was no glimmer of recognition in her placid face, and, in answer to the request that he might see the rooms where he had once lived 'for a short time,' she invited him civilly enough to come in, and to follow her upstairs.

'I expect it's the same paper, sir,' she said, as she opened the door of what had been his sitting-room. 'It was put up when uncle first took on the house, and, as it cost half a crown a foot, we always cleans it once every three years with breadcrumbs, and it comes out as new.'

How well Downing remembered the paper, with its dark-blue ground thickly sprinkled with gold stars! indeed, before she spoke again, he knew what her next words would be. 'It's the same pattern that the Queen and Prince Albert chose for putting up at Windsor Castle; you don't see such a good paper, nor

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such a good pattern, nowadays; but there, I'll just leave you a minute while you take a look round.'

v

For some moments Downing remained standing just inside the door, as much that he had forgotten, and more that he had tried vainly to forget, came back to him in a turgid flood of recollection. Suddenly something in the walls creaked, and he clenched his hands, half expecting to see figures form themselves out of the shadows. One memory was spared him; the sombre walls, the plain, heavy old furniture, placed much as it had been in his time, evoked no vision of the foreign woman who had brought him to disgrace, for, with a certain boyish chivalry, he had never allowed her to come to his rooms; instead, poor fool that he had been, he had occasionally entertained her in his official quarters, and the fact had been one of those which had most weighed against him with his informal judges.

Instead, the place where he now stood brought to his mind another woman, who had during those same years and months played a nobler, but alas! a far minor part in his life.

Mrs. Henry Delacour had been one of those beings who, though themselves exquisitely feminine, seem destined to go through life playing the part of confidential and platonic friend, for, in spite of all that is said to the contrary, platonic friendships, sometimes disguised under another name, count for much in our over-civilized world. The second wife of a permanent Government official much older than herself, her thoughts, if not her heart, enjoyed a painful and a dangerous freedom. At a time when sentiment had gone for the moment out of fashion, she lavished much innocent sentiment on those of her husband's younger colleagues who seemed worthy of her interest, and,

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for she was a kind woman, in need of it. She had first met George Downing after she had attained the age when every charming woman feels herself privileged to behave as though she were no longer on the active list, while yet quite ready, should the occasion offer, to lead a forlorn hope. What that time of life is should surely be left to each conscience, and almost to each nationality. In the case of this lady the age had been thirty-eight, Downing being fifteen years younger—a fact which he forgot, and which she conscientiously strove to remember, whenever he found himself in her soothing, kindly presence.

Their relationship had been for a time full of subtle charm, and had George Downing been as cosmopolitan as his profession should have made him, had he even been an older man, he might have been content with all that she felt able to offer him—all, indeed, that was possible. But there came a time when he found himself absorbed in a more ardent, a more responsive friendship, and when his feet learnt to shun the quiet street where Mrs. Delacour dispensed her gracious hospitality; indeed, the moment came when he almost forgot how innocently near they had once been to one another.

Yet now, as he stood inside the door of his old room, Mrs. Delacour triumphantly reasserted herself, for she had come to him on the last evening of his life in London. He advanced further into the room, and slowly the scene reconstituted itself in his mind. It had been one which no man was likely ever wholly to forget, and it came back to Downing, in spite of the lapse of twenty years, with extraordinary vividness.

Having arranged to leave early the next morning, he had given strict orders that none of his friends were to be again admitted. Sick at heart, he had been engaged in sorting the last batch of letters and bills, when the door, opening, had revealed Mrs. Delacour, dressed in the soft, rather shadowy colouring which,

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though at the time wholly out of fashion, had always seemed to him, the young George Downing, an essential part of her personality. For a moment, as she had hesitated in the doorway, he had noticed that she carried a basket.

With the egotism of youth, as he had taken the kind trembling little hand and led his visitor into the room, he had uttered the words, 'Now I know without doubt that I am dead!' As he stood there now, in this very room which had witnessed the pitiful scene, he felt a rush of shame, remembering how he had behaved during the hours that followed, for he had sat, sullenly looking on, while she had packed the portmanteaux lying on the floor, tied up packets of letters, and sorted bills. At intervals he had asked her to leave him, begged her to go home, but she had worked on, saying very little, looking at him not at all, and showing none of the dreadful tenderness which had been lavished on him by so many of his friends.

Then had come the moment when he had roused himself sufficiently to mutter a few words of thanks, reminding her, not ungently, that her husband would be expecting her back to dinner. 'Is any one coming?' she had asked, with a tremor in her voice; and on his quick disclaimer the basket had been unpacked, and food and wine put upon the table.

'Henry,' she had said, in the precise, rather anxious voice he recalled so well—'Henry remembered how well you thought of this claret;' and she had sat down, and by her example gradually compelled him to eat the first real meal he had had for days.

When at last the moment came when she had said, sadly enough, 'Now I suppose I must go home,' he was glad to remember that he had tried to bear himself like a man, tried to thank her for her coming. As he had stood, saying good-bye, she had suddenly lifted the hand which grasped hers, and had laid it against her cheek with the words, said bravely, and with a

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smile, 'You will come back, George—I am *sure* you will come back.'

As Downing stood once more in the street, now grey with twilight, after he had slipped a sovereign in Mary Crisp's hand, she asked him with natural curiosity, 'And what name shall I say, sir, when uncle asks who called? He always likes to hear of his gentlemen coming back.' Downing hesitated, and then gave the name of the man who he knew had had the rooms before him. The woman said nothing, but a look of fear came into her face as she shut the door quickly. As she did so Downing remembered that the man was dead.

CHAPTER II

'If you enter his house, his drawing-room, his library, you of yourself say, This is not the dwelling of a common mind. There is not a gem, a coin, a book thrown aside on his chimney-piece, his sofa, his table, that does not bespeak an almost fastidious elegance in the possessor.'—*Lord Byron's Journal*.

I

MR. JULIUS GUMBERG was the last survivor of a type familiar in the English, or rather in the London, society of the middle period of the nineteenth century. In those days reticence, concerning one's own affairs be it understood, was still the rule rather than the exception, but there were a certain number of men, and a few women, to whom everything seems to have been told, and whose advice on the more delicate and difficult affairs of life, if not invariably followed—for that would have been asking too much of human nature—was invariably asked.

It has always been the case that to those who know

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much shall more be revealed, and Mr. Gumberg had forgotten more scandals than even the most trusted of his contemporaries had ever told or been told. His assistance was even invoked, it was whispered, by the counsellors of very great people, and it was further added that he had been instrumental in averting more than one morganatic alliance. That, like most of those who enjoy power, he had sometimes chosen to exercise his prerogative by upholding and shielding those to whom the rest of the world cried 'Haro!' was felt to be to his credit. He had not only never married, but, so far as his acquaintances knew, never even set sail for 'le pays du tendre' with any woman belonging to a circle which had been widening as the years slipped by, and this added to his prestige and gave him authority among those whose paths had diverged so widely from his own.

To all women, especially to those who sought his help when the difficulty in which they found themselves had been caused rather by the softness of their hearts than as the outcome of mere arid indiscretion, he showed an indulgent, and, what was more to the point, a helpful tenderness, which led to repeated confidences. 'The woman who has Mr. Gumberg on her side can afford to postpone repentance,' a dowager who was more feared than trusted was said to have exclaimed; but, like so many bodily as well as moral physicians, he often felt that confidence, when it was reposed in him, had been too long delayed. An intricate problem, a situation to which there seemed no possible issue, was not, he admitted to himself, without its special charm; but as he grew older—indeed, into quite old age—he preferred exercising more subtle arts in connection with the comparatively simpler stories of human life. Unlike the poor French lady whose idle phrase has branded her throughout the ages, Mr. Gumberg delighted in innocent pleasures, while he was willing, notwith-

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standing, to make any effort and to exhume any skeleton, however grim, from a friend's closet, if by so doing he could prevent a scandal from crystallizing into a 'case.'

Still, it may be repeated that what he really enjoyed when he could do so conscientiously, and even, indeed, when he found his conscience to be in no sense on the side of the more worldly angels of his acquaintance, was to place all his knowledge of the world at the disposal of two youthful and good-looking lovers. No man, so it was said, knew more ways of melting the heart of an obdurate father, or, what is of course far more difficult, of changing the mind of a sensible mother. Of the several sayings of which he was fond of making use, and which he found applicable to almost every case, especially those of purely sentimental interest, submitted to him, his favourite came to be, 'Heaven helps those who help themselves'; but as he preferred to be the sole auxiliary of Heaven, he seldom quoted the phrase to those who might really have profited by it.

As young people sometimes found to their chagrin, Mr. Gumberg could not always be trusted to see what he was fond of calling the syllabub side of life; he occasionally took a parent's part, this especially when the parent happened to be the mother of a young man. Thus, he was impatient of the modern habit of *mésalliance*, and was old enough to remember the days when divorce was the last resort of the wealthy, while yet deploring the time when marriage was in truth an indissoluble bond. Perhaps the only action which caused him ever-recurring astonishment was the frivolity his young friends showed in entering a state of life which, according to his old-fashioned views, should spell finality.

'Heaven,' he would murmur to the afflicted mother of a misguided youth who only asked to be allowed to contract honourable matrimony with the humble

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object of his choice—' Heaven helps those who help themselves: therefore beware of the virtuous ballet-girl and of the industrious barmaid; rather persuade your Augustus to cultivate more closely the acquaintance of his cousin, a really agreeable widow, for jointures should be induced to remain in the family when this can be done without any serious sacrifice of feeling.'

Mr. Gumberg's enemies—and, of course, like most people who live the life that suits them best, and who are surrounded by a phalanx of attached and powerful friends, he had enemies—were able to point to one very serious blemish on his otherwise almost perfect advisory character. With the approach of age he had become garrulous; he talked not only freely, but with extraordinary, amazing freedom to those—and they were many—who cheered him with their constant visits, and on whom he could depend to give him news of the world he loved so well, but which for many years past he had only been able to see poised against the limited background of his fine library, of his cheerful breakfast-room, of his delightful garden.

Perhaps the fact that he was acquainted with so many of their own secrets made him the more trust the discretion of his friends, and even of his acquaintances. They on their side were always ready to urge in exculpation of their valued mentor that the old man never discussed a scandal, or indeed a secret, that was in the making. While always eager to hear any story, or any addition to a story, then amusing the circle with which he kept in close touch, he never added by so much as a word to the swelling tale; on the contrary the more intimate his knowledge of the details, the less he admitted that he knew, and his garrulity was confined to events which had already become, from the point of view of the younger generation, ancient history. The mere mention of a name—even more, a passing visit from some acquaintance long lost sight

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of—would let loose on whoever had the good fortune to be present a flood of amusing, if sometimes very muddy, reminiscence. ‘My way,’ he would say quaintly, and in half-shamed excuse, ‘of keeping a diary! and as the circulation is necessarily so very limited, I can note much which it would be scarcely fair to publish abroad.’

Thus it was that Mr. Gumberg was seldom without the company of at least one friend old enough to enjoy the real answers to long-forgotten social riddles, while the more thoughtful of his younger acquaintances recognized that some of his old stories were better worth hearing than those which they in their turn came to tell.

II

When Sir George Downing, after having returned from his excursion into the past, sought out his host in the book-lined octagon room, looking out on the Italian garden, where Mr. Julius Gumberg had established himself for the evening, it was not because he expected to learn much of interest unknown to him before, but because, though he felt half ashamed of it, he longed intensely both to speak and to hear spoken a certain name. With an abruptness which took the old man by surprise, Downing asked him: ‘Among your many charming friends, I wonder if you number a certain Mrs. Robinson, the daughter, I believe, of the late Lord Wantley?’

Mr. Gumberg’s reply was not long in coming.

‘Perdita,’ he said briskly, ‘is on the whole the most beautiful young woman I know; I don’t say, mind you, the most beautiful creature I have ever known, but at the present time I cannot call to mind any of my friends with whom I can compare her.’ He tucked the rug in which he was muffled up more tightly across his knees, and continued, with manifest

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enjoyment: 'Doubtless you have noticed, George, even in the short time you have been at home, that nowadays all our women claim to be beauties—and the remarkable thing about it is that they succeed, the hussies!'

He gave a loud, discordant chuckle, and the pause enabled the other to throw in the words:

'Mrs. Robinson's name is, I believe, Penelope.'

He spoke quickly, fearing a full biography of the fair stranger by whose beauty Mr. Gumberg set so much store.

'They succeed, and yet they fail,' continued the old man, ignoring the interruption. 'They aim—it's odd they should do so—at being as like one another as peas in a pod. Our beauties don't give each other room. Ah! you should have seen, George, the women of my youth. The plain ones kept their places—and very good places they were, too—but the others! Now scarce a week goes by but some kind lady comes to me with, "Oh, Mr. Gumberg, I'm going to bring you the new beauty. I'm sure you will be charmed!" But I've given up expecting anything out of the common. When I was a young man a new beauty was something to look at: she had hair, teeth, eyes—not always *mind*, I grant you: but she was there to be looked at, not talked at! I'm told that now a pretty woman hasn't a chance unless she's clever. And that's the mischief, for the clever ones can always make us believe that they're the pretty ones, too. Give me the yellow-haired, pink-cheeked kind, out of which one could shake the sawdust, eh?' Then he sighed a little ghostly sigh, and added: 'Yes, her name's Penelope, of course—I was going to tell you so—but she's Perdita, too, obviously.'

'And has there been a Florizel?' Downing's question challenged a reply, and Mr. Gumberg looked at him inquiringly as well as thoughtfully, as he answered in rather a softer tone:

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'God bless my soul, no! That's to say, a dozen, more or less! But I don't see, and I doubt if Perdita sees, a Prince Charming among 'em. As for Robinson, poor fellow!'—Mr. Gumberg hesitated; words sometimes failed him, but never for long—'all I can say is he was the first of those I was the first to dub the Sisyphtians. I used to feel quite honoured when he came to breakfast. People enjoyed meeting him. I never could see why; but you know how they all—especially the women—run after any man that is extraordinarily ordinary. Melancthon Wesley Robinson—what a handicap, eh? And yet I'm bound to say one felt inclined to forgive him even his name, even his good looks, even his marriage to Penelope Wantley, for he had the supreme and now rare charm of youth. You had it once, George; that was why we were all so fond of you.'

Mr. Gumberg got up from his chair, pushed the rug off his shrunken legs, and slowly walked round the room till he reached one of the two cupboards which filled up the recess on either side of the fireplace. From its depths he brought out a small portfolio. Downing had started up, but his host motioned him back to his seat with a certain irritation, and then, as he made his way again to his own blue leather arm-chair, he went on:

'Those for whom I invented the name of Sisyphtians—there are plenty of 'em about now—well, I divide 'em into two sets, both, I need hardly say, equally distasteful to me. The one kind cultivates platonic friendships with the women'—Mr. Gumberg made a slight grimace. 'Their arguments appeal to feminine sensibility; "Make yourself happier by making others happy," that's the notion, and I understand that they're fairly successful as regards the primary object, but there seems some doubt as to how far they succeed in the other—eh? I should hate to be made happy myself. That sort of fellow is the husband's best

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friend. Not only does he keep the wife out of mischief, but he will act as special constable on occasion, and when everything else fails he's always there, ready to put his arm round the dear erring creature's waist and implore her to remember her duties! The other set undertake a more difficult task, and they don't find it so easy. That sort don't put their arms round even their own wives' waists; their dream is to embrace Humanity. She's a jealous mistress, and, from all I hear, I doubt if she's as grateful as some of 'em make out!'

The old man sat down again. He drew the rug over his knees, and propped up the small portfolio on a sloping mahogany desk which always stood at his elbow. With a certain eagerness he turned over its contents, still talking the while.

'Young Robinson was their founder, their leader. He built the first of the palaces in the slums. I'm told they call the place the Melancthon Settlement. I'm bound to say that he took it—and himself—quite seriously, lived down there, and, what was much more strange, persuaded Penelope to live there, too. Oh, not for long. She would soon have tired of the whole business!' He added in a lower tone, his head bent over the open portfolio: 'I don't find things as easily as I used to do. Yet I know it's here.' Then he cried eagerly, 'I've found it!' and held up triumphantly a rudely-coloured print of which the reverse side was covered with much close writing.

Downing put out his hand with a certain excitement; he knew that what the old man was about to show him had a bearing on the story he was being told.

The print, obviously a caricature, represented a horsewoman sitting a huge roan and clad in the long riding-habit, almost touching the ground, which women wore in the twenties and thirties of last century. A large black hat shaded, and almost entirely

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concealed, the oval face beneath. In one hand the horsewoman held a hunting crop, with the other she reined in her horse, presenting a dauntless front to some twenty couple of yelping and snarling foxhounds. The colour was crude, but the drawing clear, and full of rough power.

Downing suddenly realized that each hound had the face of a man; also that the countenance of the foremost dog was oddly familiar: he seemed to have seen it looking down on him from innumerable engravings, in particular from one which had hung in the hall of his parents' town house. This dog, almost alone clean-shaven among its companions, held between its paws the baton of a field-marshal. Below the print was engraved in faded gilt letters the words 'The Lady and her Pack.'

'A valuable and very rare family portrait,' said Mr. Gumberg grimly. 'The lady is Penelope's grandmother, Lady Wantley's mother, and the Pack——' He checked himself, surprised at the look which passed over the other's face.

'Her grandmother?' Downing interrupted almost roughly. 'Why, you showed me that print years ago, when I was a boy. I have never forgotten it.' Then, in a more natural tone, he added: 'I suppose it's really unique?'

'As far as I know, absolutely unique, but such odious surprises are nowadays sprung upon collectors! I believe this copy is the only one which has survived the many determined efforts to destroy the whole edition, which was never at any time a large one. I fancy such things were produced speculatively, you understand, doubtless with a view to the pack. These good people'—Mr. Gumberg pointed with his long, lean finger to the human-faced dogs—'were naturally quite ready to buy up all the available copies, and then, later, John Oglethorpe, after he had become the fair huntswoman's husband, also most naturally made

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it his business to get hold of the few which had found their way into collections. I've been told also that Lord Wantley during many years made a point of keeping his eye on one copy, which finally disappeared, no one knows how, just on the eve of its being safely stored in the British Museum! I got mine in Paris quite thirty years ago by an extraordinary bit of good fortune. And so I showed it you, did I? I wonder why. I so seldom show it, unless, of course, there's some special reason why I should do so.'

Mr. Gumberg stopped and thought for a few minutes. 'Let me see,' he added thoughtfully, 'the last person who saw it was old Mrs. Byng. It was the day of Penelope's marriage. It's a good way from Hanover Square, and the old lady never takes a cab—too stingy. I knew how a sight of this picture would revive her, poor old soul! One of my very few remaining contemporaries, George.' Mr. Gumberg sighed a little heavily; then, with a certain regret, 'So you know all about that strange creature, Rosina Bellamont?'

Again he took up the print between his lean fingers. He hated being done out of telling a story, and Downing, well aware of this peculiarity, smiled and said kindly enough: 'When you showed me this thing before, you told me more of the pack than of the lady. In fact, if I remember rightly, it was just after the death——'

Mr. Gumberg again interrupted with returning good-humour: 'Of course I remember: it was just after the death of poor Jack Storks. You came in as I was reading his obituary in the *Times*, and I showed you the print to prove that he had not always been the grave and reverend signior they made him out to have been!'

'And Lady Wantley's mother, what of her?' Downing feared once more that his venerable friend would start off on a reminiscent excursion of more general than particular interest.

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‘She was a very remarkable woman,’ answered Mr. Gumberg, ‘and I will tell you how and where I first made her acquaintance and that of her daughter.’

III

‘When I was a lad of fifteen,’ began the old man, with a marked change of tone and even of manner, ‘my uncle, who was, as you are aware, a Russia merchant, the kindest and wisest man I have ever known, and the most delightful of companions, took me a walking tour through the Yorkshire dales. Now, those were the days when all inns were bad and all houses hospitable. We walked miles without meeting a living creature, being the more solitary that my uncle preferred the bridle-paths to the highroads, but he generally contrived that we should find a kind welcome and comfortable quarters at the end of each day.’

‘One afternoon, when climbing a stiff hillside not far from the place whence five dales can be seen stretching fanstickwise, we came on two figures standing against the skyline, a lady and a young girl, hand in hand, curiously dressed—for those were the days of the crinoline—in long, straight grey gowns and circular cloaks. Their faces, the one pale, the other fresh and rosy, were framed by unbecoming close bonnets, each lined with a frill of stiff white stuff. Even I, foolish boy that I was, and while considering the strange pair most inelegantly dressed, saw that they were in a sense distinguished, utterly unlike the often oddly-gowned country wives and maids we met now and again trudging past us.’

‘To my surprise, my uncle, when he had become aware of their presence, quickened his steps, and when we had reached the lonely stretch of grass on which they were standing—that is, when we were close to the singular couple, mother and daughter or grandmother and granddaughter; I could not help

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wondering what relationship existed between them—he bowed, saying: “Have I the honour of greeting Mrs. Oglethorpe?” The elder lady’s cheek turned as rosy, but only for a moment, as that of the girl by her side, and as she answered, “Yes,” the colour receding seemed to leave her cheek even paler than before. “That is my name,” she said; and then looking, or so it seemed to me, very pleadingly at my uncle, she added quickly: “This is my young daughter. Adelaide, curtsy to the gentleman.” “Your father and I, young lady,” said my uncle, again bowing, “have had business dealings together for many years, and I am honoured to meet his daughter.”

‘Well, George, we followed them, retracing our steps down the dale, and there, hidden in a park surrounded by high walls, we came at last on a fine old house of grey stone. Our approach brought no sign of life or animation. The formal gardens lacked the grace and brilliancy afforded by flowers, and yet were in no sense neglected. Mrs. Oglethorpe turned the handle of the front-door, and we passed into a large hall, where we were greeted with great civility by an elderly man, whom I supposed, rightly, to be our host, though, to be sure, his dress differed in no way from that of those who passed silently backwards and forwards through the hall, and who were apparently his servants.

‘Dear me, how strange everything seemed to my young eyes! In particular, I was amazed to notice that a row of what were apparently family portraits were all closely shrouded with some kind of white linen, while below them, painted on the oak panelling, was the following sentence’—Mr. Gumberg turned the print he still held in his hand, and peered closely at the writing with which the back of it was covered—
‘“*Forsake all, and thou shalt possess all. Relinquish desire, and thou shalt find rest.*” The hall was over-

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looked by what had evidently been a music-gallery, and, glancing up there, I saw that the carved oak railing had been partly covered in with deal boards, on which was written in very large letters another strange saying: "*Esteem and possess naught, and thou shalt enjoy all things.*" I tried, I trust successfully, to imitate my uncle, the most courteous of men, in showing nothing of the astonishment that these things caused me, the more so that Mr. Oglethorpe treated us with the greatest consideration, himself fetching bread, cheese, and beer for our entertainment.

' After we had refreshed ourselves, a pretty young woman, dressed in what appeared to be a modified copy of the curious straight garments worn by our hostess and her daughter, led us to a bedchamber, the walls of which were hung, as I now judge, looking back, with some fine French tapestry. Across the surface of this ran the words, each letter cut out of white linen stitched on to the tapestry: "*Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.*" '

Mr. Gumberg paused a moment, and then continued his story: ' The dining-room, to which we were bidden by the ringing of a bell, must have been once, from its appearance, the scene of many great banquets; but I noted that it only contained two long tables, composed of unpainted boards set on rough trestles, while the walls, hung with maroon Utrecht velvet, presented to my eyes an extraordinary appearance, each picture—and there were many—being hidden from sight, as were those in the hall, while on a long strip of white cloth, which ran right round the room above the wainscotting, was written: "*Self-denial is the basis of spiritual perfection. He that truly denies himself is arrived at a state of great freedom and safety.*" '

' I noticed that the tables were laid for a considerable company, and soon there walked slowly in some

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forty men and women, all dressed in what seemed to me a very peculiar manner. There were many more women than men, and they sat at separate tables, Mrs. Oglethorpe taking the head of the one, while her husband, with my uncle at his right hand, presided over the other. The food was plain, but of good quality; it was eaten in silence, and while we ate the daughter of the house, Adelaide Oglethorpe, sat on a high rostrum and read aloud from a book which I have since ascertained to have been Mr. William Law's "Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life."

' This reading surprised me very much, and, boy-like, I wondered anxiously whether the girl was to be deprived of her evening meal; but after we had finished supper she put a mark in the book she had been reading, and, as the others all walked out, took her place at a little table I had before scarcely noticed, and there, waited on most assiduously by her father, she enjoyed a meal rather more dainty in character than that which the rest of us had eaten. Looking back, George,' observed Mr. Gumberg thoughtfully, ' I think I may say that this was the first time in my life that I realized how even the most rigid human beings sometimes fall away, and this almost unconsciously, from their own standards.

' We only stayed at Oglethorpe one night, and perhaps that is why I recollect so well all that took place. Before we left, my uncle, to the evident gratification of our host, advised me to copy the various inscriptions about the house, notably one which had greatly taken his fancy, and which was inscribed above the writing-table where Mrs. Oglethorpe apparently spent many of the earlier hours of each day. This saying ran: "*Charity is the meed of all; familiarity the right of none.*" Our hostess, of whom I stood in great awe, bade her little daughter show me the schoolroom, observing that there I should most

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probably notice texts and inscriptions more suited to my understanding. Miss Oglethorpe's room was strangely different from the others I had seen; and, with a surprise which I was unable to conceal, I saw hanging in a prominent place over the mantelpiece a painting of a beautiful young woman pressing a little child to her bosom, while below the gold frame was written the familiar verse: "*Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.*" Adelaide Oglethorpe evidently noticed my surprise, for she explained diffidently that this painting represented her father's mother and himself as a child: further, that this lady having been a most virtuous and excellent wife and mother, Mr. Oglethorpe had not dealt with her portrait as he had done with those of his own and his daughter's less reputable forebears.'

Mr. Gumberg ceased speaking. Downing's eyes were still fixed on the rudely coloured caricature of Rosina Bellamont and her admirers.

'And so this woman,' he said, 'became a mother in Israel? Well, I suppose such things do happen now and then.'

'Rather more often now than then,' Mr. Gumberg declared briskly. 'My uncle used to describe to me, when I had come to a riper age, what a stir the marriage made. Why, they even said the King—William IV., you know—sent for Oglethorpe and remonstrated with him. Of course, a Bellamont can always find a man to make an honest woman of her, but she seldom has the good fortune to bear off such a prize as was John Oglethorpe. That wasn't, however, the most amazing part of the story. Within a few months of her marriage Mrs. Oglethorpe fell under the influence of a preacher—a second Fletcher of Madeley. But she was evidently not the woman to rest content with being a mere disciple, and so, with the active help of her husband, she set herself to build

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up that strange kind of religious phalanstery which I have described to you, and in which the future Lady Wantley was born and bred. Rosina Bellamont was one of those women who are born to good fortune as the sparks fly upward, and her luck did not desert her in the one matter in which she could hardly have counted on it——'

Downing looked up. 'You mean the marriage of her daughter?' he said.

'Of course I do,' returned the old man vigorously. 'In those days peers didn't hold forth at Exeter Hall—in fact, Wantley was the first of that breed; and by great good fortune, chance—I suppose it *was* chance, eh, George?—brought him to Oglethorpe. The odd thing was his going there at all; once there, 'twas natural he should feel attracted.'

'I suppose Lady Wantley is like her daughter?' said Downing.

'God bless my soul, no! Lady Wantley's an Oglethorpe. Penelope's a——' The old man did not finish his sentence, but turned it off with: 'She's quite unlike her mother. Pity she wasn't a boy. The present man's no good to 'em—I mean to Lady Wantley and Penelope. Why should he be? He wasn't fairly treated. Of course he got Marston Lydiate, for that's entailed; but the place in Dorset, Monk's Eype, and all the money, were left away to the girl, although I did my best for him. Wantley spoke to me about it, but I couldn't move him; and then he was hardly cold before Penelope married her millionaire! A marriage, George, a marriage——' Words failed Mr. Gumberg. For the third time he repeated, 'A marriage'—his old eyes gleamed maliciously—'which was no marriage! You understand, eh? *Mensa non thorus*—that was the notion. Common among the early Christians, I believe. Well, no one can say what the end of it would have been, for nature abhors a vacuum; but the poor monkish

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creature died, caught small-pox from a foreign sailor, and the bewitching girl was left all the Robinson millions!'

'Then I suppose you advised restitution to young Lord Wantley?'

Mr. Gumberg chuckled. He evidently thought his guest intended a grim joke. 'The sort of thing a trustee would suggest, eh, George?' But Downing was apparently quite serious.

'I don't see why not,' he said. 'Do you mean that Lord Wantley is penniless?'

Mr. Gumberg nodded. 'Something very like it,' he declared. 'Of course, the old man—though he was twenty years younger than I am now when he died—had some show of reason for the unfair thing he did. People always have. When he, and I suppose Lady Wantley, realized that they were not likely to have a son, he gave his heir—his third cousin, I fancy—the family living of Marston Lydiate, and years afterwards the man became a Romanist! Wantley chose to consider himself very much injured. He never saw his cousin again, and for years never took any notice of the boy—in fact, not till the ex-parson was dead.'

'Is young Lord Wantley a Roman Catholic?' asked Downing indifferently.

'No, he's not,' said Mr. Gumberg. 'The other day I heard him described as "a stickit Papist," and I suppose that's about what he is. But where's your interest in these people, George?' Mr. Gumberg asked suddenly. 'You don't know 'em, do you?'

Downing hesitated. He was in the mood in which men feel almost compelled to make unexpected and amazing confidences, but the words which were so nearly being said were never uttered.

Cutting across his hesitation, his half-formed impulse of taking his old friend into his confidence, came the exclamation: 'Why, of course! You've

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met her! When I heard from you at Pol les Thermes I felt sure there was someone else there that I knew, but I couldn't think who it was at the moment. However, that don't matter now, for it seems you've found each other out! I didn't say too much, George, did I? She is a beautiful creature?'

Mr. Gumberg's assertion was not without a note of interrogation. He sometimes felt an uneasy suspicion that his standards, especially in the matter of feminine loveliness, were not always blindly accepted by the generations that had succeeded his own. But Downing's answer reassured him.

'I agree with you absolutely,' he said very gravely. 'I do not remember a more beautiful woman, even in the old days.'

This tribute to his taste sent Mr. Gumberg to bed in high good-humour; and as he made his slow progress along the passage, leaning on Downing's friendly arm, he kept muttering, 'Glad you met her—glad you met her.' So often are we inclined to rejoice at happenings which, if we knew more, we might regard as calamities.

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CHAPTER III

' . . . a queen
By virtue of her brow and breast;
Not needing to be crowned, I mean.'

BROWNING.

I

WHEN Penelope Wantley became the mistress of Monk's Eype, she left the villa as she had always known it, for her sense of beauty compelled her to approve the few changes which had been made to the great bare rooms during her father's long tenure of the place. As child and as girl she had found there much that satisfied her craving for the romantic and the exquisite in nature and in art; and long after she was a grown-up woman the flagged terraces, each guarded by a moss-grown balustrade, broken at one end by steep stone steps which led from one rampart to another, commanding all the way down the blue-green and grey bars of moving water below, served as background to the memoried delights of her childhood.

Penelope the woman had but to withdraw herself from what was about her to see once more the child Penelope, watching with fascinated gaze the stone and marble denizens of the gardens and the wood. In the summer twilight, just before little Penelope went up to bed, the graceful water-nymphs sometimes came down from their pedestals on the bowling-green which lay beyond the western wing of the villa, and the malicious, teasing faun, leaving the spot from which he gazed over the changing seas, ranged at will through the little pine-wood edging the open down. Even in the daylight the little girl sometimes thought she caught glimpses of gentle green-capped fairies—a

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whole world of strange, uncanny folk—who played 'touch' and blind-man's buff among the hanging creepers and at the foot of each of the flower-laden bushes which covered the slopes of this enchanted garden.

In these fancies the young friends who occasionally came over to see her, riding their ponies or driving their governess-carts, from distant country-houses, had never any share. More was told to a boy with whom at one time little Penelope had been much thrown. David Winfrith, the son of a neighbouring clergyman, who, when shunned for no actual fault of his own, had seen himself and his only child received very kindly by Lord and Lady Wantley, was older than Penelope by those three or four years which in childhood count so much, and later count so little. He had spent more than one holiday at Monk's Eype, sharing Penelope's play-room, which, partly hollowed out of the cliff, was lifted a few feet above the beach by rude stone pillars. There a large solid table, filling up the whole space in front of the wide window, made a fine 'vantage-ground' for the display of the boy's skill as toy-maker and boat-builder.

Penelope, looking back, associated David Winfrith with her earliest memories of Monk's Eype, and for her the villa, especially certain of the great rooms of which the furnishings had been so little disturbed for close on a hundred years, was instinct also with the thought and the vanished figure of her father, who, when wearied and cast down by being brought into contact with the misery he did so much to relieve, found in his western home a great source of consolation and peace.

II

Lord Wantley, or rather his wife, had been among the first and most ardent patrons of the group of

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painters who chose to be known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. More than one of these had spent happy days at Monk's Eype, and it had been owing to the advice of the most famous survivor of the early P.R.B. that Penelope had been allowed, and even encouraged, to devote much of her early girlhood to the serious pursuit of art. How far her parents had been right her mother sometimes doubted; but there could be no doubt that the great artist had truly divined in the beautiful girl a touch of exceptional power—some would have called it by a rarer name. It was not his fault if such circumstances as youth, rank, beauty, and ultimately great wealth, had asserted their claims, and turned one who might have been a great woman artist into an amateur.

Therefore it was rather as a lover of beauty and as a woman, fully, if rather disdainfully, conscious of her own feminine supremacy, that Mrs. Robinson had been so far well content to leave the spacious rooms of her own, as it had been her father's, favourite home, in much the same order as when they had been arranged under the eye of her great-uncle Ludovic, known in local story as the Popish Lord Wantley.

There was a side of her nature which made her feel peculiarly at ease among the faded splendours of these Italian-looking rooms. Her tall figure, slenderly stately in its proportions; the small, well-poised head; clear-cut, delicate features; deep, troubled-looking blue eyes; masses of red-brown hair, drawn high above the broad low forehead, in the fashion worn when powdered locks lent charm to the plainest face—in short, her whole presence and individuality made a satisfying harmony with faded brocades, the ivory inlaid chairs and tables, and the massive gilt dower-chests, which had no desecration to fear from their present owner's beautiful hands.

That Penelope could create as well as preserve beauty of surroundings—the one power seems now-

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adays as rare as the other—was seen in the room, half studio, half library, where, when at Monk's Eype, she chose to spend much of her time.

Situated at the extreme western end of the villa, on which, indeed, it still formed a strange excrescence, the room had been added to the main building at a time when Penelope's parents had been inclined to believe much more than they afterwards came to do in the power of eloquent speech. The substantial brick walls of the hall, as it was still called by some of the older servants, had witnessed curious gatherings, and heard the voices of many a famous lay-preacher dealing with schemes which, whether practical or nebulous, had all the same single purpose—that of leaving the world better than it had been before.

Penelope Wantley, as a little girl, had once been taken, when in Paris, to see a certain old lady, who had in her day played a considerable rôle in the brilliant society of the forties. The room in which the English visitors had been received made a deep impression on the child's imagination. The walls were painted in that soft shade of blue which the turquoise is said to assume when a heart is untrue to its wearer, and which is of all tints that best suited to be a background, whether of human beings or of paintings; and the old lady's furniture had been hidden in what the little Penelope had likened to herself as white dimity overalls. The windows looked out on a fine old garden, along whose shady paths had once walked blind Châteaubriand, led by Madame Récamier.

Many years later, when Mrs. Robinson was arranging and transforming the one room at Monk's Eype which she felt at liberty to alter and to arrange after her own fancy, she followed, perhaps unconsciously, the scheme of colouring which had so much pleased her childish fancy. But whereas in the French lady's salon there had been no books—indeed, no sign that

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such a thing as literature existed in the world—books were not lacking at Monk's Eype. Had Penelope followed her own natural instinct, perhaps she would have kept even more closely than she had done to the Frenchwoman's example; but, though she prided herself on being one of the most unconventional of human beings, she was naturally influenced by the atmosphere in which she had always moved and lived.

'By Penelope's books you may know, not Penelope, but Penelope's friends,' her cousin, Lord Wantley, had once observed. He had been tempted to substitute the word 'adorers' for 'friends,' but had checked himself in time, recollecting that the man with whom he was speaking was one to whom the warmer term was notoriously applicable.

As to what the books were—for there was no lack of variety—French novels, much old and modern verse, mock-erudite volumes, and pamphlets of the type that are written a hundredfold round whatever happens to be the fad of the moment, warred here and there with a substantial Blue-Book, or, stranger still, with some volume which contained deep and painful probings into the gloomier problems of life. Such were the contents of the book-shelves, which, by a curious conceit of the present owner of Monk's Eype, framed the tall narrow door connecting her studio with the rest of the building.

Lord Wantley would also have told you that his brilliant cousin never read. That, however, would have been unjust and untrue. Mrs. Robinson, however deeply absorbed in other things, always found time to glance through the books certain of her friends were good enough to send her.

Sometimes, indeed, she felt considerable interest in what she had been bidden to read, and almost always she showed an extraordinary, if passing, insight into the author's meaning; but to tell the truth, and I hope that in so doing I shall not prejudice my readers

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against my heroine, she was one of those women, a greater number than is in these days suspected, who regard literature much as the modern civilized man of the world regards art. Such a man goes to those exhibitions which have been specially mentioned to him as worthy of notice, but even to the best of these it would never occur to him to go, save with a pleasant companion, a second time; and in buying, it is always the expert on whom he leans, not his own taste and judgment. In the same way Penelope was always willing to read any volume which her world was discussing at the moment, but she would have been a happier woman had she been able sometimes to take up, not necessarily a classic, but at any rate a book of yesterday rather than of to-day.

But if literature was in her room only used in a decorative sense, the water-colours and drawings, the casts, and the bas-reliefs, which were so hung as to form a low dado down the whole length of the studio, were one and all of remarkable quality, and here you touched the quick reality of Penelope's life. In these matters she needed no advice, for, while as an artist she was truly humble, she only cared to measure herself with the best.

There was something pathetic in this beautiful woman's desire to discover hidden genius; only certain French painters with whom she herself from time to time still studied could have told how generous and how intelligent was the help she was ever ready to bestow on those of her fellow art-students whose means were more slender than their talent. It was to these, so rich and yet so poor, that her heart really warmed; it was on them that she bestowed what time that she could spare from herself.

And yet the room which was specially her own showed very few signs of artistic occupation. True, on a plain table were set out paint-boxes, palettes, sketch-books; but an unobservant visitor might have

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come and gone without knowing that the woman he had come to see ever took up a pencil or used a brush.

The broad low dado, composed of comparatively small water-colours, drawings, and bas-reliefs, was twice broken, each time by a glazed oil-painting, each time by the portrait of a woman.

To the left of the book-framed door, hung a painting of Penelope's mother, Lady Wantley.

At every period of her life Lady Wantley had been one of those women whom artists delight to paint, and the great artist whose work this was had often had the privilege. But perhaps owing to certain peculiar circumstances connected with this portrait, it was the one of them that he himself preferred. The painting had been a commission from the sitter herself; she had wished to give this portrait to her husband on his sixtieth birthday, and together she and the painter, her friend, who had once owed to her and to Lord Wantley much in the way of sympathy and encouragement, had desired to suggest in the composition something which would be symbolic of what had been an almost ideal wedded life.

Then, without warning, when the scheme had been scarcely sketched out, had come Lord Wantley's death away from home, and the portrait, scarcely begun, had been hastily put away, counted by the artist as among those half-finished things destined to remain tragic in their incompleteness. But some months later his old friend and patroness, clad in no widow's weeds, but in the curious black-and-white flowing draperies, and close Quakerish bonnet, which had become to her friends and acquaintances almost a portion of her identity, had come to see him, and he learnt that she wished her portrait should be finished.

'He always disliked the unfinished, the incomplete,' she had said rather wistfully; and the artist had carried out her wish, finding little to alter, though, perhaps, in the interval between the first and the

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second sitting the colourless skin of the sitter had lost something of its clearness, the heavy-lidded grey eyes had gained somewhat in dimness, and the hair from dark brown had become grey.

The painter himself substituted, for the lilies which were to have filled in part of the background, a sheaf of rosemary.

The other picture had a less intimate history; and the only two people who ever ventured to criticise Penelope had both, not in any concert with one another, suggested that another place might be found for the kitcat portrait, by Romney, of Mrs. Robinson's famous namesake, than that where it now hung in juxtaposition with that of Lady Wantley.

III

Beneath this last portrait, holding herself upright on the low white couch, a girl, Cecily Wake, sat waiting. She looked round the room with an affectionate appreciation of its special charm—a charm destined to be less apparent when seen as a frame to its brilliant mistress, who had the gift, so often the perquisite of beauty, of making places as well as people seem out of perspective. Cecily herself, all unconsciously, completed the low-toned picture by adding a delicious touch of fragrant youth.

Only Mrs. Robinson in all good faith considered Cecily Wake pretty. True, she had the abundant hair, the clear eyes, the white teeth, which seemed to Mr. Gumberg so essential to feminine loveliness; but beautiful she was not—indeed, none of her friends denied her those qualities which the plain are always being told count so much more than beauty; that is, abundant kindness, a sterling honesty, and a certain fiery loyalty which both touched and diverted those who knew her.

To be worshipped in the heroic manner—that is,

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to be the object of hero-worship—is almost always pleasant, especially if the divinity is conscious that he or she has indeed done something to deserve it. Penelope Robinson had rescued her young kinswoman from a mode of living which had been peculiarly trying and unsuitable to one of an active, ardent mind; more, she had provided her with work—something to do which Cecily had felt was worth the doing. As all this had not been achieved without what Penelope considered a great deal of trouble on her part, she did not feel herself wholly undeserving of the deep affection lavished on her by the girl whom she chose to call cousin, though in truth the relationship was a very distant one.

Mrs. Robinson had just now the more reason to be satisfied both with her own conduct and with that of her young friend. When it had been settled that Cecily should spend a portion of her holiday—for she was one of those happy people who, even when grown up, have holidays — at Monk's Eype, it had not occurred to Penelope to include in her invitation the aunt from whom she had rescued her friend, and she had been surprised when Cecily had refused in a short, rather childish-warded note. 'Of course, I should like to come to you, and it is very kind of you to ask me, but I cannot leave my aunt. She has been so looking forward to my holiday, and, after all, I shall enjoy being at Brighton, near my old convent.' Such had been Cecily's answer to her dear Penelope's invitation, and, though she had shed bitter tears over it, she had sent off her letter without consulting the old lady, to whom she was sacrificing so great a joy.

Happily for the world, there is a kind of unselfishness, which, as a French theologian rather pungently put it, '*fait des petits*,' and Mrs. Robinson's answer had been responsive. 'Of course, I meant your aunt to come, too,' she wrote, lying. 'I enclose a note for her. I shall be very glad to see her here.' There

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she wrote the truth, for only exceptional people object to meet those whom they have vanquished in fair fight.

This was why Cecily Wake, supremely content, was sitting, late in the afternoon of a hot August day, in her cousin's pretty room.

The glass doors were wide open, and from the flagged terrace blew in the warm, gentle sea-wind.

Cecily was still so young in body and in mind that she really preferred work to play; nevertheless, playtime was very pleasant, especially now that she was beginning to feel a little tired after the long journey from town, and the more fatiguing experience of seeing to the unpacking of her aunt's boxes, and of establishing her in bed.

The elder Miss Wake was one of those women who, perhaps not altogether unfortunately for their friends, enjoy poor health, and make it the excuse for seldom doing anything which either annoys or bores them. Occasionally, however, to her own surprise and disgust, Poor Health the servant became Ill Health the master, and to-day outraged nature had insisted on having the last word. This was why the aunt, really tired, and suffering from a real headache, was lying upstairs, thinking, not ungratefully, that Cecily, in spite of many modern peculiarities and headstrong theories of life, was certainly in time of illness as comforting a presence as might have been that ideal niece the aunt would fain have had her be.

Perhaps the great characteristic of youth is the power of ardently looking forward to the enjoyment of an ideal pleasure. To retain even the power of keen disappointment is to retain youth. Cecily Wake had longed for this visit to Monk's Eype much as a different kind of girl longs for her first ball, but, instead of feeling disappointed at being received with the news that her hostess, after making all kinds of small arrangements for her own and her aunt's

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comfort, had gone out riding, she had felt relieved that the meeting between Miss Wake and Mrs. Robinson had been put off till the former had regained her usual tart serenity.

The girl enjoyed these moments of quiet in what was, to one who had had few opportunities of living amid beautiful surroundings, the most charming room she had ever seen. Most of all, she delighted in one exquisite singularity which it owed to the fancy of Lady Wantley. Not long after it had been built, and while it was still being used as a lecture-hall, Lady Wantley had had an oblong opening effected in the brickwork just above the plain stone mantelpiece.

This opening, filled with clear glass, was ever bringing into the room, as no mere window could have done, a sense of nearness to the breezy stretch of down, studded with gnarled, wind-twisted pine-trees, standing out darkly against the irregular coast-line which stretched itself, with many a fantastic turn, towards Plymouth.

IV

The tall book-framed door suddenly opened, and Mrs. Robinson walked swiftly in. As she came down the room, a smile of real pleasure and welcome lighting up her face, Cecily was almost startled by the look of vigorous grace and vitality with which the whole figure was instinct, and which was accentuated rather than lessened by the short skirt, the dun-coloured coat, and soft hat, which fashion, for once wedded to sense, has decreed should be the modern riding-dress.

Almost involuntarily the girl exclaimed: 'How well you look!'

'Do I?' Penelope sat down close to Cecily; then she leant across and lightly kissed the young girl's round cheek. 'I ought to look well after a long ride with David Winfrith. You know, he has just been

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made Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the new Government.'

'Oh, is he here, too?' Cecily spoke disappointedly. She had hoped, rather foolishly, that Penelope would be alone at Monk's Eype.

'No, he's not staying here. His own home is close by. We must go over there some time and see his old father; you would like him, Cecily, better than you do the son.' She hesitated, then continued in the curiously modulated voice which was one of her peculiarities: 'We had such a ride—such a discussion—such a quarrel—such a reconciliation! Oh yes, I feel much better than I did yesterday.'

'Was it about the Settlement?' Cecily fixed her thoughtful, honest eyes on her friend's face.

'Our discussion? No, no! My dear child, you must forget all about the Settlement while you are here. I want to tell you about the people you are going to meet. First, there's my mother, who, in theory, will spend a good deal of time with your aunt, though in practice I shall be surprised if they often speak to one another, for they are too utterly unlike even to differ. Then there's my cousin, Lord Wantley. I'm afraid you won't like him very much, for he makes fun of me—and of the Settlement, too. But it isn't fair to tell you that! I want you to make friends with him. You must spare him some of the pity you are so ready to lavish on poor people who are unhappy or unlucky—Ludovic has been rather unlucky, and he has a perfect genius for making himself unhappy.'

'Lord Wantley is Catholic, is he not?' Cecily spoke with some hesitation. She knew her aunt had told her something concerning Penelope's cousin, but she could not remember what it was which had been told her.

Penelope looked up from the task of unbuttoning her gloves. 'No, he's nothing of the kind,' she said decidedly, 'but perhaps he ought to be. Who

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knows—Miss Wake may perhaps convert him,' she smiled rather satirically. Cecily looked troubled; she was beginning to realize that her holiday would be very different from what she had hoped and expected it to be. 'Seriously, I want you to interest him in the Settlement. We cannot expect David Winfrith to go on doing as much for us as he has been doing. Besides'—she hesitated, and a shadow crossed the radiant face—'I am thinking of making certain arrangements which will greatly alter his position in the whole affair.'

'But what would the Settlement do without Mr. Winfrith?' There was utter dismay in the tone.

'Well, we needn't discuss all that now. I only mean that Lord Wantley is what people used to call a man of parts, and I have never been able to see why he should not do more for me—I mean, of course, in this one matter of the Settlement—than he has done as yet. He has led a very selfish life.' Penelope spoke with much vigour. 'He has never done anything for anybody, not even for himself, and what energy he has had to spare has always been expended in the wrong direction. The only time I have ever known him show any zeal was just after my father's death, when he presented the chapel of the monastery at Beacon Abbas, near here, with a window in memory of *his* father.' A whimsical smile flitted across her face. 'I rather admired his pluck, but of course if my mother had been another kind of woman it would have meant that we should have broken with him. For my father, as all the world knew, had a great prejudice against Roman Catholics, and Ludovic could not have done a thing which would have annoyed him more.'

Cecily made no comment. Instead, she observed, diffidently, 'I will certainly try and interest him in the Settlement. I have brought down the new report.'

A delightful dimple came and went on Mrs. Robin-

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son's curved cheek. 'I think your spoken remarks,' she said seriously, 'will impress Ludovic more than the new report; in fact, he would probably only pretend to read it. Most people only pretend to read reports.'

She got up, and walked to the plain deal table where lay a half-finished sketch of the flagged terrace and the pierced stone parapet; then she opened the drawer where she kept various odds and ends connected with her work.

'Tell me,' she said a little hurriedly, her face bent over the open drawer as if seeking for something she had mislaid—'tell me, Cecily, have you had any weddings at the Settlement? In my time there was much marrying and giving in marriage.'

'So there is now.' Cecily was eager to prove that the Settlement was not deteriorating. Even to her loyal heart there was something strange and unsatisfactory in Mrs. Robinson's apparent lack of interest in the work to which she devoted so considerable a share of her large income each year. But often she would tell herself that it was natural that her friend should shrink from mentioning, more than was necessary, the place which had been so intimately bound up with the tragedy of her husband's early and heroic death.

Cecily had never seen Melancthon Robinson, but she had of late been constantly thrown in company with those over whom even his vanished personality exercised an extraordinary influence. The fact that Penelope had been his chosen coadjutor, that she was now, in spite of any appearance to the contrary, his ever-mourning widow, was never absent from the girl's mind. When the two young women were together this belief added a touch of reverence to the affection with which Cecily regarded her brilliant friend. And now she blushed with pleasure even to hear this passing careless word of interest in the place and in

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the human beings round whom she was now weaving so much innocent and practical romance.

In her eagerness Cecily also got up, and stood on the other side of the table, over whose open drawer Penelope was still bending. 'Perhaps you remember the Tobutts—the man who got crushed by a barrel? Well, his daughter, who is in my cooking class, is engaged to a very nice drayman. She is such a good girl, and I——'

Penelope suddenly raised her head. She had at last found what she had been seeking.

Cecily stopped speaking somewhat abruptly. She felt a little mortified, a little injured, as we are all apt to do when we feel that we have been talking to space, for Mrs. Robinson's face was filled with the spirit of withdrawal. It often was so when anything reminded her of that fragment of her past life to which she looked back with a sense of almost angry amazement. And yet she had surely heard what her companion had been saying—

'A good girl?' she repeated absently! then, hurrying over the words as if anxious they should get themselves said and heard: 'I wish you to give to her, or to some other girl you really like, and whose young man you think well of, this wedding ring. Please don't say it comes from me. And, Cecily, one thing more—you need not tell me to whom you have given it.'

Poor Cecily! perhaps she was slow-witted, but no thought of the true significance of the little incident crossed her mind. Mrs. Robinson was famed among the workers of the Settlement for her odd, intelligent little acts of kindness, accordingly a pretty romance somewhat in this wise thistle-downed itself on the girl's brain: Characters—Penelope and Poor Lady. Poor Lady—stress of poverty—having to part with cherished possessions, has good luck to meet Mrs. Robinson who buys from her, among other things—of

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course at a fancy price—her wedding-ring. Remembering that gold wedding-rings are prized heirlooms in the neighbourhood of the Settlement——

‘It would greatly add to the value of the gift,’ Cecily said shyly, ‘if I might say it came from you.’

‘No, no, no!’ Mrs. Robinson spoke with sharp decision; her blue eyes narrowed and darkened in displeasure. ‘My dear child, you don’t understand. Come!’—she made an effort to speak lightly, even caressingly—‘do not let us say anything more about it.’ Then, looking rather coldly into the other’s startled eyes, she added: ‘I have never before known you wanting in *la politesse du cœur*. Haven’t you heard the expression before? No? Well, it was a famous Frenchman’s definition of tact.’

She laid her left hand on the girl’s arm, and, as they moved together towards the door, Cecily became aware that the hand lying on her arm was ringless.

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CHAPTER IV

'The inner side of every cloud
Is bright and shining:
I therefore turn my clouds about,
And always wear them inside out,
To show the lining!'

I

CECILY WAKE had not been brought up by her aunt. Even before the death of her father, which had followed that of her mother at an interval of some years, she had been placed in one of those convent schools which, in certain exceptional circumstances, take quite little children as boarders. Accordingly, till the age of eighteen, the only home she had ever known was the large, old-fashioned Georgian manor-house near Brighton, which had been adapted to suit the requirements of the French nuns who had first gone there in 1830.

As time went on that branch of the Order which had settled in England had become cosmopolitan in character. Among those who joined it were many English women, one of them a sister of Cecily's mother. But the Gallic nationality dies hard, even in those who claim to be citizens of the heavenly kingdom, and Cecily's convent remained French in tradition, in methods of education, and in the importance attached by the nuns to such accomplishments as bed-making, sewing, cooking, and feminine deportment. They also taught the duty of rather indiscriminate charity, holding, with the saint who had been their founder, that it is better to give alms to nine impostors rather than risk refusing the tenth just beggar; but this

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interpretation of a Divine precept was unconsciously abandoned by Cecily after she had become intimately acquainted with the conditions of life which surrounded the Melancthon Settlement. Still even there she remained, to the regret of her colleagues, curiously open-handed, and—what was worse, for a principle was involved—she always, during her connection with the Settlement, persisted in saying that she herself, were she in the place of the deserving seeker for help, would rather receive half a crown in specie than five shillings' worth of goods chosen by some one else!

As for education, in the modern sense of the word, Cecily was, and remained, very deficient; many subjects now taught to every school-girl were never even mentioned within the convent walls, and this was specially true of all the 'ologies, including theology. On the other hand, Cecily and her school-fellows were taught to read, write and talk with accuracy two languages. The daughter of a man who has left his mark on English literature, and whose children had one by one returned to the old fold, taught them English composition, as she herself had been taught it by a good old-fashioned governess. This nun, a curious original person, also introduced the elder girls under her charge to much of the sound early Victorian fiction with which she herself had been familiar in her youth.

The Superioress, who reserved to herself the supervision of all the French classes, was a fine vigorous old woman, the daughter of a Legitimist who had been among the leaders of the Duchesse de Berri's abortive rising. As was natural, she held and taught very strong views concerning the state, past and present, of her beloved native country. To her everything which had taken place in France before the Revolution had been more or less well done, while all that had followed it was evil and reprobate. Without going so far as to show Louis XIV. '*étudiant les plans du*

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Général La Vallière et du Colonel Montespan,' she completely hid from her pupils the ugly side of the old régime, and exhibited the Sun King as among the most glorious descendants of St. Louis. To her the romance of French history was all woven in and about Versailles, the town where she had herself spent her girlhood, and on the steps of whose palace her own uncle had fallen in defending the apartments of Marie Antoinette on the historic 5th of October. The many heroic episodes of the revolution and of the Vendean wars were as familiar to this old nun, who had spent more than half her long life in England, as if she had herself taken part in them, and she delighted in stirring her own and her pupils' blood by their recital.

So Cecily's heroes and heroines all wore doublet and hose, or hoops, patches, and powder. Most of them spoke French, though in the spacious chambers of her imagination there was room left for Charles I., his Cavaliers, and their valiant wives and daughters.

Equally real to the girl were the saints and martyrs with whose histories she was naturally as familiar, and it was characteristic of her sunny and kindly nature that she early adopted as her patroness and object of special veneration that child-martyr whose very name is unknown, and to whom was accordingly given by the Fathers that of Theophila—the friend of God.

Cecily, knowing very well what it was to be without those ties with which most little girls are blessed, thought it probable that even in heaven St. Theophila must sometimes feel a little lonely, especially when she compared herself with such popular saints—from the human point of view—as St. Theresa, St. Catherine, St. Anthony, and St. Francis.

Perhaps some of the nuns, who in the course of long years had grown to regard Cecily Wake as being as integral a part of their community as they were them-

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selves, hoped that she would finally follow their own excellent example. This was specially the wish of the old house-sister who had been appointed the nurse of the motherless little girl whose arrival at the convent had been the source of such interest and amusement to its inmates. But the Mother Superior cherished no such hopes, or, rather, no such illusion. Not long before Cecily left the convent for 'the world'—as all that lies beyond their gates is generally styled by religious—the nuns spent a portion of their recreation in discussing the girl who was in so special a sense their own child, and whose approaching departure caused some among them keen pain. The Mother Superior heard all that was said, and then, speaking in her native tongue, and with the decision that marked her slightest utterances, observed: '*Cette petite fera le bonheur de quelque honnête homme. Elle est faite pour cela.*' After a short pause, and with a twinkle in her small brown eyes, she had added: '*Et il ne sera pas à plaindre, celui-là!*'

Cecily's first introduction to the world was not of a nature to make her fall in love with its pomps and vanities. The busy, cheerful conventual household, largely composed of girls of her own age, where each day was lived according to rule, every hour bringing its appointed duty or pleasure, was an unfortunate preparation for life in a small Mayfair lodging, spent in sole company with a nervous elderly woman, who, while capable of making a great sacrifice of comfort in order to do her duty by her great-niece, was yet very unwilling to have the even tenor of her life upset more than was absolutely necessary.

The elder Miss Wake, from her own point of view, had not neglected Cecily during the years the girl had been at school. She had made a point of spending each year the Christmas fortnight at Brighton, and of entertaining the child for one week of that fortnight. During those successive eight days the elder lady had

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always been on her best behaviour, and Cecily easy to amuse. Then, also, the child had many school-fellows in Brighton, and her aunt always took her once each year to the play. Cecily remembered these brief yearly holidays with pleasure, and when about to leave the convent she looked forward to life in London as to an existence composed of a perpetual round of pleasant meetings with old school-fellows, of evenings at the theatre, varied with visits and benefactions to Arcadian poor, for Cecily, after a sincere childish fashion, was anxious to do her duty to those whom she esteemed to be less fortunate than herself.

The reality had proved, as realities are apt to do, very different from what she had imagined. The elder Miss Wake, like so many of those women born in a day when no career—and it might almost be said no pleasant mode of life—was open to gentlewomen of straitened means, had learnt to content herself with a way of existence which lacked every source of healthy excitement, interest, and pleasure.

Her one amusement, her only anodyne, was novel-reading. For her and her like were written the three-volume love-stories, full of sentiment and mild adventure, for which the modern spinster no longer has a use. When absorbed in one of these romances, she was able to put aside, to push, as it were, into the background of her mind, her most incessant, though never mentioned, subject of thought. This was the problem of how to make her small income suffice, not only to her simple wants, but to the upkeep of the consideration she thought due to one of her name and connections.

Miss Theresa Wake never forgot that she belonged to a family which, in addition to being almost the oldest in England, would now have been doubtless great and powerful had it not remained faithful to a creed of which the profession in the past had meant the loss of both property and rank.

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Settling down in London at the age of fifty, after a bitter quarrel with her only remaining brother, a small squire in the North of England, she had taken the ground-floor of a lodging-house of which the landlord and his wife had come from her own native village, and therefore grudged her none of that respect which she looked for from people in their position.

In their more prosperous days the Wakes had married into various great Northern families, and Miss Wake was thus connected with several of her Mayfair neighbours. For a while after her removal to London she had kept in touch with a certain number of people whose names spelled power and consideration, but as the years went on, and as her income lowered some pounds each year, she gradually broke with most of those whose acquaintanceship with her had only been based, as she well knew, on a good-natured acceptance of the claim of distant kinship. From some few she continued, rather resentfully, to accept such tokens of remembrance as boxes of flowers and presents of game; an ever-narrowing circle left cards at the beginning of the season, and fewer still would now and again come in and spend half an hour in her dreary sitting-room. These last, oddly enough, almost always belonged to the newer generation, the children of those whose parents she had once called friends; when a stroke of good fortune had come to these young people, sometimes when a feeling of happy vitality almost oppressed them, a call on Miss Wake took the shape of a small dole to fate.

There had been in the very long ago a marriage between a Wake and an Ogleshorpe. Lord and Lady Wantley had made this fact the excuse to be persistently courteous and kind to the peculiar spinster lady, and in this matter Penelope had followed her parents' example.

Two or three times a year—in fact, it might almost be said, whenever she was in London—Penelope

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Robinson shed the radiance of her brilliant presence on the dowdy little lodging, always paying Miss Wake the compliment of coming at the right time, that is, between four and six, and of being beautifully dressed. On one such occasion, when she might surely have been forgiven for cutting short her call, for she was on the way to a royal garden-party, she had actually prolonged her visit nearly forty minutes!

Yet another time she had come in for only a moment, but bringing with her a gift which had deeply moved Miss Wake, for the noble water-colour drawing seemed to bear into the dingy London sitting-room a breath of the rolling hills and limitless dales of that tract of country which lies in Yorkshire on the border of Westmorland, and which the old lady still felt to be home. 'I thought you would like it,' Penelope had exclaimed eagerly. 'I went over to Cargill Force from Oglethorpe, and I chose the place——'

'I know,' had interrupted Miss Wake, her voice trembling a little in spite of herself. 'You must have drawn it from the mound by the Old Lodge. I recognise the fir-tree, though it must have grown a good deal since I was there last. The hills seem further off than they used to do years ago, and, of course, we do not often have such bad weather as that you have shown here. There are often long days without any rain.'

Penelope had driven away a little chilled. 'I wonder if she would have preferred a photograph,' she said to herself. But Miss Wake would not have preferred a photograph. She saw not Nature as her cousin, Mrs. Robinson, saw it, and she by no means wished she could; but she found herself looking more often, and always with increasing conviction of its truth, at the painting which showed the storm-god let loose over the wild expanse of country which formed the background to all her early life and

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associations. Finally Miss Wake hung the water-colour in the place of honour over her mantel-piece, where she could herself always see it from where she sat nursing both her real and her fancied ailments.

This slight account of the elder Miss Wake will perhaps make it clear how grievous was her perplexity when she decided that it was her duty to take charge of her now grown-up niece. The idea that the girl might, and indeed should, work for her livelihood never presented itself to the aunt's mind, and yet the matter had been one that grimly reduced itself to pounds, shillings, and pence. Cecily's income was the interest on a thousand pounds, and her bare board and bed, to say nothing of clothes, must cost nearly twice that sum. Miss Wake did the only thing possible: she gave up all those necessities which she regarded as luxuries, but sometimes she allowed herself to dwell on the possibility that her niece would either marry, or develop, as would be so convenient, a religious vocation.

The months that followed her arrival in London had the effect of gradually transforming Cecily Wake from an unthinking child into a thoughtful young woman. Her energy and power of action, finding no outlet, flowed back and vitalized her mind and nature. For the first time she learnt to think, to observe, and to form her own conclusions. She was only allowed to go out alone to the church close by, and to a curious old circulating library, originally founded solely with a view of providing its subscribers with Roman Catholic literature, but which, as time had gone on, had gradually widened its scope, especially as regarded works of history, memoirs, and biographies. Novels were forbidden to the girl, according to the strict rule which had obtained in Miss Wake's own girlhood, and when Cecily felt the dreary monotony of her life almost intolerable, she

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would slip off to church for half an hour, and return to her aunt, if not cheerful, at least submissive.

More than once certain of the Jesuit priests, who had long known and respected the elder Miss Wake, had tried to persuade her to allow her niece a little more liberty and natural amusement. But, greatly as the old lady valued the friendship of those whom she considered as both holy and learned, she did not regard herself at all bound to accept their advice as to how she should direct the life of her young charge. Above all, she courteously but firmly declined for her niece any introductions to other young people. 'Later on I shall perhaps be glad to avail myself of your kindness,' she would answer a certain kindly old priest, who had it in his power to open many doors; and he, in spite of a deserved reputation for knowledge of the world and the human heart, never divined Miss Wake's chief reason for declining his help—the fact, simple, bald, unanswerable, that there was no money to buy Cecily even the plainest of what the old lady, to herself, called 'party frocks.'

In time Cecily, growing pale from want of air, heavy-eyed from over-reading, and utterly dispirited from lack of something to do, was secretly beginning to evolve a scheme of going back to her beloved convent as pupil-teacher, when, on a most eventful March day, Mrs. Robinson, driving up Park Street on her way back from a wedding, suddenly bethought herself that it was a long time since she had called on her old cousin.

II

To Cecily Wake, her first meeting with the woman to whom she was to give such faithful affection and long-enduring friendship ever remained vivid.

Mrs. Robinson had inherited from her mother, Lady Wantley, the instinct of dress, that gift which

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enables a woman to achieve distinction of appearance with the simplest as with the most splendid materials and accessories. She rarely wore jewels, but her taste inclined, far more than that of Lady Wantley had ever done, to the magnificent. Herself an artist, she dressed, when it was possible to do so, in a fashion which would have delighted the eyes of the Italian painters of the Renaissance, and it was perhaps fortunate, in these grey modern days, that her taste was checked and kept in bounds by the fact, often only remembered by her when at her dressmaker's, that she was a widow.

On the day that Mrs. Robinson, calling on Miss Wake, first met Cecily, the wedding to which she had just been was the excuse for a white velvet gown of which the brilliancy was softened and attenuated by a cape of silver-grey fur. To the elder Miss Wake the sight of her lovely kinswoman always recalled—she could not have told you why—the few purple patches which had lightened her rather dull youth. The night after seeing Penelope she would dream of her first ball, again see the great hall of a famous Northern stronghold filled with the graceful forms of early Victorian belles, and the stalwart figures of young men whose brilliant uniforms were soon to be tarnished and blood-stained on Crimean battle-fields.

As for Cecily, the girl's lonely heart was stormed by the first kindly glance of Mrs. Robinson's blue eyes, and it wholly surrendered to the second, emphasized as it was by the words: 'You should have written and told me of this new cousin; I should have come sooner to see you both.'

Then and there, after all due civilities to the aunt had been performed, the young girl had been carried off, taken for an enchanting drive, not round the dreary, still treeless park, where, every alternate morning, Miss Theresa Wake and Cecily walked for an hour by the clock, but through streets which, even

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to the convent-bred girl, were peopled with the shades of those who had once dwelt there.

Finally, after a long vista of duller, meaner streets, there came a halt before the wide doors of a long, low building, of which the latticed windows and white curtains struck a curious note of cleanliness and refinement in the squalid neighbourhood.

‘Is this a monastery or convent?’ Cecily asked.

Penelope smiled. ‘No, but it is a very fair imitation of one. This is the Melancthon Settlement. Perhaps you have heard of it? No? Ah, well, this place was built by my husband.’ Penelope’s voice became graver in quality. She added, after a short pause: ‘I lived here during the whole of my married life, and of course I still come whenever I’m in town and can find time to do so.’ Something in the girl’s face made her add hastily: ‘Not as often as I ought to do.’ But to her young companion this added word was but a further sign of the humility, the thinking ill of self, which she had always been taught is one of the clearest marks of sanctity.

Cecily’s mind was filled with empty niches, waiting to be filled with those heroes and saints with whom she might have the good fortune to meet in her pilgrimage through life. Straightway, to-day, one of these niches was filled by Penelope Robinson, and though the radiant figure sometimes tottered—indeed once or twice nearly fell off its pedestal altogether—Cecily’s belief in her certainly helped the poor latter-day saint, after her first and worst fit of tottering was over, to live up to the reputation which had come to her unsought.

III

The large panelled hall sitting-room to which the outside doors of the Settlement gave almost direct access, and of which the sole ornament, if such it

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could be called, consisted of a fine half-length portrait of a young man whose auburn hair and pale, luminous eyes were those of the typical enthusiast and dreamer, was soon filled with an eager little crowd of men and women, who, as if drawn by a magic wand, hastened from every part of the large building to welcome Mrs. Robinson.

One slight and very pretty girl, whose short curly hair made her look somewhat like a charming boy, struck Cecily as very oddly dressed, for she wore a long straight, snuff-coloured gown, and a string of yellow beads in guise of sash. Cecily much preferred the look of an older and quieter-mannered woman, who, after having shaken hands with Mrs. Robinson, disappeared for some moments, coming back ladened with a large tea-tray.

‘ You see,’ said the girl in the snuff-coloured gown—
‘ you see, we wait on ourselves.’

‘ Then there are no servants here? ’ Cecily spoke rather shyly. She thought the Settlement quite strangely like a convent.

‘ Of yes, of course there are; but tea is such an easy meal to get ready. Anyone can make tea.’

Mrs. Robinson had sat down close to the wide fireplace; her face, resting on her two clasped hands, shone whitely against the grey, flickering background formed by the flame and smoke of the log fire, while her fur cape, thrown back, revealed the velvet gown which formed a patch of soft, pure colour in the twilit room.

She listened silently to what first one, and then another, of those round her came forward to say, and Cecily noticed that again and again came the words, ‘ We asked Mr. Winfrith,’ ‘ Mr. Winfrith considered,’ ‘ Mr. Winfrith says.’ Suddenly Mrs. Robinson turned, and, addressing the curly-headed girl, said quickly: ‘ Daphne, will you show Miss Wake round the Settlement? I think it would interest her, and

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I have to discuss a little business with Mr. Hammond and Mrs. Pomfret.'

Cecily was disappointed. She would so much rather have stayed on in the hall, listening, in the deepening twilight, to talk and discussions which vaguely interested her. But she realized that the girl called Daphne (what a pretty, curious name!—none of the girls at the convent had been called Daphne) felt also disappointed at this banishment from Mrs. Robinson's presence, and she admired the readiness with which the other turned and led the way into the broad stone cloister out of which many of the rooms of the Settlement opened.

As Daphne walked she talked. Sometimes her explanations of the use to which the various rooms through which she led her companion were put might have been addressed to a little child or to a blind person. Such, for instance, her remark in the refectory: 'This is where we eat our breakfast, lunch, and supper—everything but tea, which we take in the hall.'

Now and again she would give Cecily her views on the graver social problems of the moment. Once while standing in the very pretty and charmingly arranged sitting-room, which was, she proudly said, her very own, she suddenly asked her first question: 'Does not this remind you of a convent cell?' But she did not wait for an answer. 'We aim,' she went on, 'and I think we succeed, in preserving all that was best in the old monastic system, while doing away with all that was corrupt and absurd. Personally, I much regret that we do not wear a distinctive dress; in fact, before I made up my mind to join the Settlement, I designed what I thought to be an appropriate costume.' She looked down complacently. 'This is it. Does it not remind you of the Franciscan habit? You see the idea? The yellow beads round my waist recall the rosary which the

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monks always wore, and which I suppose they wear now,' she added doubtfully.

'Oh yes,' said Cecily, 'but not round their waists.'

'I hesitated rather as to which dress would be the most appropriate, and which would look best. But brown, if a trying colour to most people, has always suited me very well, and, though perhaps you do not know it, the Franciscans had at one time quite a close connection with England. I mean of course before the Reformation. Monks had such charming taste. One of my uncles has a delightful country-house which was once a monastery. Now you have seen, I think, almost everything worth seeing about the Settlement. I wonder, though, whether you would care to look into our Founder's room? It is only used by Mr. Hammond when he is doing the accounts, or seeing someone on particular business. I am sure Melancthon Robinson would have liked him to use it always, but he hardly ever goes into it. I can't understand that feeling, can you? I should think it such a privilege to have been the friend of such a man!'

But Cecily hardly heard the words, for she was looking about her with eager interest, trying to reconstitute the personality of the man who had dwelt where she now stood, and who had been Mrs. Robinson's beloved—her husband, her master. Severely simple in all its appointments, two of the walls of the plain square room were lined with oak bookcases, filled to overflowing, one long line of curiously-bound volumes specially attracting the eye.

'Do you know what those are?' asked Daphne; and Cecily, surprised, realized that her companion awaited her answer with some eagerness.

'Do you mean those books?' she said.

The other girl smiled triumphantly. 'Yes. Well, they are Blue-Books. When people talk to me of the Settlement, and criticize the work that is done here, I

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merely ask them *one* question. I say, "Have you ever read a Blue-Book?" Of course they nearly always have to answer "No," and then I know that their opinion is worth nothing. I must confess,' she added honestly enough, 'that I myself had never even seen a Blue-Book till I came here. Mr. Winfrith made me read one, and I was *so* surprised. I thought it would be such tremendously hard work, but really it was very easy, for I found it was made up of the remarks of quite commonplace people.'

'And have you read all these right through?' asked Cecily, looking with awe at the long line of tall volumes.

'Oh no! how could I have found time? After I had read the one I did read, I talked it well over with Mr. Winfrith, and he said he didn't think it would be worth while for me ever to read another. Of course I asked him if he thought I ought just to glance through a few more—for I was most anxious to fit myself for the work of the Settlement—but he said, No, it would only be waste of time.'

'It must be very interesting, working among poor people and teaching them things,' said Cecily wistfully. 'I suppose you show them how to sew and mend, and darn and cook?'

Daphne looked at her, surprised. 'Oh no,' she said in her gentle, rather drawling voice; 'I can't sew myself, so how could I teach others to do so? Besides, all poor people know how to do that sort of work. We want to encourage them to think of higher things. They already give up far too much time to their clothes and to their food. I have a singing class and a wood-carving class. Then I make friends with them, and encourage them to tell me about themselves. Mrs. Pomfret thinks that a mistake, but I'm sure I know best. They have such extraordinary ideas about things, especially about love. They seem to flirt quite as much as do the girls

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of our sort. I was most awfully surprised when I realized *that!*'

Cecily and Daphne found Mrs. Robinson in the hall, saying good-bye to those about her. 'Will you come and lunch with me to-morrow?' she said to Daphne. And as the other joyfully accepted, she added: 'We have not had a talk for a long time.'

When they were once more in the carriage, driving through the brilliantly-lighted streets, Mrs. Robinson turned to Cecily, and said: 'Little cousin, I wonder who is your favourite character in history? Joan of Arc? Mary Queen of Scots? I'll tell you mine: it was the woman—I forget her name—who first said, in answer to a friend's remark, "I hate a fool!" She had plenty of courage of the kind I should like to borrow. The thought of to-morrow's execution makes me sick.' And as Cecily looked at her, bewildered, she added: 'I wonder what you thought of Daphne Purdon? They said very little—I mean Philip Hammond and Mrs. Pomfret—but they simply won't keep her there any longer! She corrupts her class of match-girls, and, what of course is much worse, they are corrupting *her*.' Mrs. Robinson's lips curved into delighted laughter at the recollection of a whispered word which had been uttered, with bated breath, by Mrs. Pomfret.

'How long has Miss Purdon been at the Settlement?' Perhaps Cecily, childish though she was, entered more into her new friend's worries than the other realized.

'Not far from a year, broken, however, by frequent holidays in friends' country-houses, and by a month spent last summer on a yacht. Poor Daphne is a fool, but she's not a bad fool, and above all, she's a very pretty fool!'

'Oh yes,' said the girl eagerly, 'she is very pretty, and I should think very good, even if she is not very sensible.'

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‘Well, her father, who was an old friend of my father’s, died two years ago, leaving practically nothing. At the time Daphne was engaged, and the man threw her over; it was quite a little tragedy, and, as she took it into her head she would like to do some kind of work, I persuaded my people at the Settlement to take her and see what they could do with her. Like most of my “goody” plans, it has failed utterly.’

Cecily’s kind, firm little hand, still wearing the cotton gloves of convent days, crept over the carriage rug, and closed for a moment over her new cousin’s fingers. Mrs. Robinson went on: ‘Philip Hammond is the salt of the earth, and Mrs. Pomfret is an angel, but I never see them without being told something I would rather not hear. Now, David Winfrith, who has so much to do with the many responsibilities connected with the Settlement, never worries me in that way. Perhaps if he did,’ she concluded in a lower tone, ‘I should see him as seldom as I do the others.’

‘And who,’ asked Cecily with some eagerness—‘who is David Winfrith?’

‘Like Daphne’s,’ answered Mrs. Robinson, ‘his is an inherited friendship. His father, who is a clergyman, was one of my father’s oldest friends.’ Then quickly she added: ‘I should not have said that, for David Winfrith is one of my own best friends, the one person to whom I feel I can always turn when I want anything done. What will perhaps interest you more is the fact that he is becoming a really distinguished man. If you read the *Morning Post* as regularly as I know your aunt reads it——’

‘She has left off taking in a daily paper,’ said Cecily quickly. ‘She says it tries her eyes to read too much.’

But Penelope went on, unheeding: ‘You would know a great deal more about Mr. Winfrith and his doings than you seem to do now. Seriously, he is

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the kind of honest, plodding, earnest fellow whom the British public like to feel is looking after them, and each day he looks after them more than he did the day before. And he will go plodding on till in time—who knows?—he may become the Grand Panjandrum, the Prime Minister himself! ’

‘ Then, he does not live at the Settlement? ’

‘ Oh no! He has sometimes thought of spending a holiday there, but he very properly feels that he owes his free time to his father; but even when resting he works hard, for he is, and always has been, provokingly healthy. As for his connection with the Settlement, it has become his hobby. To please himself ’—Mrs. Robinson spoke quickly, as if in self-defence—‘ no one ever asked him to do so—he looks after the business side of everything connected with the place. I am the Queen, and he is the Prime Minister; that is, he listens very civilly to all I have to say, and then he does exactly what he himself thinks proper! Of course, I get my way sometimes; for instance, he disapproved of Daphne Purdon.’

‘ I thought they were great friends,’ said Cecily, surprised. ‘ He gave her the first Blue-Book she ever read.’

‘ Ah!’ said Mrs. Robinson, ‘ did he? That was just like him, trying to make a pig’s ear out of a silk purse! Still, even so, he will certainly be delighted to hear of her execution; for he saw from the very first that she was quite unsuited for the life, and, of course, like all of us, he likes to be proved right.’

As she spoke, Mrs. Robinson was watching the girl by her side. Now and again a gleam of bright light cast a glow on the serious childish face, showed the curves of the sensible firm mouth, lit up the hazel eyes, so empty of youthful laughter. During the drive to the Settlement Cecily had talked eagerly, had poured out her heart to her new friend, telling far more than she knew she told, both of her past and

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present life. And Mrs. Robinson's active, intelligent brain was busy evolving a scheme of release for the young creature to whom she had taken one of her unreasoning instinctive likings.

When at last, it seemed all too soon to Cecily, the carriage stopped before old Miss Wake's dingy Mayfair lodging, Mrs. Robinson held the other's hand a moment before saying good-bye. She did not offer to kiss the girl, for Penelope was not given to kissing; but she said very kindly: 'We must meet again soon. I am going to Brighton for a few days next week. Suppose I were to come in to-morrow morning and ask Miss Wake to let you go there with me? We would go out to your convent, and I should make friends with the old French nun of whom you are so fond. She and I might think of something which would make your life here a little less dull, a little more cheerful.' And that night no happier girl lay down to sleep in London than Cecily Wake.

IV

Mrs. Robinson was also in a softened mood, and when she found David Winfrith waiting for her in the library of the old house in Cavendish Square which had been her father's, and which had seen the coming and going of so many famous people, she greeted him with a gaiety, an intimate warmth of manner, which quickened his pulses, and almost caused him to say words he had made up his mind never again to utter.

Soon she was kneeling by the fire warming her hands, talking eagerly, looking up, smiling into the plain, clean-shaven face, of which she knew every turn and expression. 'You must forgive and approve me for being late,' she exclaimed. 'I have spent my afternoon exactly as you would always have me do! Firstly, I fulfilled my social dooty, as Mr. Gumberg would say, by going to the Walberton wedding'—a

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slight grimace defaced for a moment her charming eyes and mouth—‘enough to put one out of love for ever with matrimony; but, then, my ideal still remains in those matters what it always was.’ In answer to a questioning look her eyelids flickered as she said two words, ‘Gretna Green!’ and an almost imperceptible quiver also passed over Winfrith’s face.

She went on eagerly, pleased with the betrayal of feeling her words had evoked: ‘Then I drove to the Settlement, where I listened patiently while Philip Hammond and Mrs. Pomfret poured their woes into my ears.’

‘That I’m sure they did not,’ he interrupted good-humouredly.

‘Oh yes, they did! They don’t keep everything for you. Well, Daphne Purdon is leaving—not, of course, of her own free will. You were right and I was wrong in that matter. But I think I’ve found just the right person to replace her.’

‘H’m,’ said he.

‘Someone who will be quite ideal, whom even Mrs. Pomfret liked at first sight! But don’t let’s talk of the Settlement any more. Listen, rather, to my further good deeds. I am going to Brighton, a place I detest, in order to give pleasure to a good, kind little girl who is just now having a very bad time.’

‘That,’ he said, ‘is really meritorious. And when, may I ask, is this work of mercy to take place?’

‘Next week; I shall be away for at least four days.’

‘Well, perhaps I shall be in Brighton for a night,’—Winfrith brushed an invisible speck off his sleeve—‘Wednesday night, myself. I do not share your dislike to the place. We can talk over Settlement affairs there, if we meet, as I suppose we shall?’

Penelope hesitated. ‘Yes,’ she said at last, rather absently. ‘We can talk over things there better than here. I expect to go abroad rather earlier this spring.’

‘Why that?’ He could not keep the dismay out of

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his voice. 'I thought you were so fond of the spring in London?'

She stood up, and they faced one another, each resting a hand on the high marble mantelpiece. 'I love London at all times of the year,' she said, 'but I am a nomad, a wanderer, by instinct. Perhaps mamma's mother, before she "got religion," was a gipsy. I have always known there was some mystery about her.' She spoke lightly, but Winfrith's lips closed, one of his hands made a sudden arresting movement, and then fell down again by his side, as she went on unheeding, looking, not at him, but down into the fire. 'Why don't you take a holiday, David—even you are entitled to a holiday sometimes—and come with me where I am going—down to the South, west of Marseilles, where ordinary people never, never go?'

'My dear Penelope, how utterly absurd!' But there was a thrill in the quiet, measured voice.

She looked up eagerly, moved a little nearer to him. 'Do!' she cried—'please do! Motey would be ample chaperon.' She added unguardedly, 'she is used to that ungrateful rôle.'

'Is she?' he asked sharply. 'Has she often had occasion to chaperon you, and—and—a friend, on a similar excursion?'

Penelope bit her lip. 'I think you are very rude,' she said. 'Why, of course she has! Every man I know, half your acquaintances, have had the privilege of travelling with me across the world. When one of your trusted members goes off on a mysterious holiday, you can always in future say to yourself, "He has paired with Penelope!"'

He looked at her, perplexed, a little suspicious, but he was utterly disarmed by her next words. 'David?'—she spoke softly—'how can you be so foolish? I have never, never, never made such a proposal to any one but you! Now that your mind is set at rest, now that

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you know you will be a unique instance'—she could not keep the laughter out of her voice—'will you consent to honour me with your company? It could all be done in a fortnight.'

'No.' He spoke with an effort, and hesitated perceptibly. But again he said, 'No. I can't get away now—'tis impossible. Perhaps later—at Easter.'

But Mrs. Robinson had turned away. Mechanically she tore a paper spill into small pieces. 'At Easter,' she said with a complete change of tone, 'I shall be in Paris, and every soul we know will be there, too, and I certainly shall not want *you*.'

'Well, now I must be going.' He spoke rather heavily, and, as she still held her head averted, he added hurriedly, in a low tone, 'You know how gladly I would come if I could.'

'I know,' she said sharply, 'how easily you could come if you would! But never mind, I am quite used to be alone—with Motey.'

In spite of her anger and disappointment, she was loth to let him go. Together they walked through the sombre, old-fashioned hall, of which the walls were hung with engravings of men who had been her father's early contemporaries and friends, and to which she had ever been unwilling to make the slightest alteration. Every lozenge of the black and white marble floor recalled her singularly happy, eager childhood, and Mrs. Robinson would have missed the ugliest of the frock-coated philanthropists and statesmen who looked at her so gravely from their tarnished frames.

She went with him through into the small glazed vestibule which gave access to the square. Herself she opened the mahogany door, and looked out, shivering, into the foggy darkness which lay beyond.

Then came a murmured word or two—a pause—and Winfrith was gone, shutting the door as he went, leaving her alone.

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As Mrs. Robinson was again crossing the hall she suddenly stayed her steps, pushed her hair off her forehead with a gesture familiar to her when perplexed, and pressed her cold hands against her face, now red with one of her rare, painful blushes.

She saw, as in a vision, a strange little scene. In her ears echoed fragments of a conversation, so amazing, so unlikely to have taken place, that she wondered whether the words could have been really uttered.

A man, whose tall, thick-set, and rather ungainly figure she knew familiarly well, seemed to be standing close to a tall, slight woman, with whose appearance Penelope felt herself to be at once less and more intimate. She doubted her knowledge of the voice which uttered the curious, ill-sounding words: 'You may kiss me if you like, David.' Not doubtful, alas! her recognition of the quick, hoarse accents in which had come the man's answer: 'No, thank you. I would rather not!'

Could such a scene have ever taken place? Could such an invitation have been made—and refused?

Mrs. Robinson walked on slowly. She went again into the library; once more she knelt down before the fire, and held out her chill hands to the blaze.

That any woman should have said, even to her oldest—ay, even to her dearest friend, 'You may kiss me if you like,' was certainly unconventional, perhaps even a little absurd. But amazing, and almost incredible in such a case, would surely be the answer she still heard, so clearly uttered: 'No, thank you. I would rather not!' Then came the reflection, at once mortifying and consoling, that many would give—what?—well, anything even to unreason, to have had this same permission extended to themselves.

She tried to place herself outside—wholly outside—the abominable little scene.

Supposing a woman—the foolish woman who had

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acted on so strange an impulse—now came in, and telling her what had occurred, asked her advice, how would she, Penelope, make answer to such a one?

Quick came the words: 'Of course you can only do one of two things—either never see him again, or go on as if nothing had happened.'

She saw, felt, the woman wince.

'As to not seeing him again, that is quite out of the question. Besides, there are circumstances——'

'Oh, well,' she—Penelope—would say severely, 'of course, if you come and ask my advice without telling me *everything*——'

'No one ever tells everything,' the woman would object, 'but this much I will confide to you. There was a time—I am sure, by all sorts of things, that he remembers it more often than I do—when this man and I were lovers, when he kissed me—ah, how often!'

Penelope flushed. How could the other, this wraith-like woman, tell this to her? But, even so, she would answer her patiently: 'That may be. But in those days you two loved one another dearly. To such a man that fact makes all the difference. He is the type—the rather unusual type—who would far rather have no bread than only half the loaf.'

'But how wrong! how utterly absurd!' the other woman would cry. 'How short-sighted of him! The more so that sometimes, not of course always, the half has been known to include the whole.'

'Yes—but David Winfrith is not a man to understand that. And if I may say so'—thus would she, the wise mentor, conclude her words of advice and consolation to this most unwise and impulsive friend—'I think you have really had an escape! In this case the half would certainly have come to include the whole. To-night you are tired and lonely; in the morning you will realize that you are much better off as you are. You already see quite as much of him as you want to do, when in your sober senses.'

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(‘ Oh, but I do miss him when he isn’t there.’)

‘ What nonsense! You do not miss him when you are abroad, when you—forgive me, dear, the vulgar expression—have other fish to fry. No, no, you have had an escape! Being what he is, he will meet you to-morrow exactly as if nothing had happened, and then you will go abroad and have a delightful time.’

(‘ Yes, alone!’)

‘ Alone? Of course. Seeing beautiful places of which he, if with you, would deny the charm; for, as you have often said to yourself, he has no love, no understanding, of a whole side of life which is everything to you.’

(‘ Yes, but he would have enjoyed being with me.’)

‘ So he would, only more so, in a coal-pit. No, no, you have made the life you lead now one which exactly suits you.’

Mrs. Robinson got up. She rang the bell. ‘ Would you please ask Mrs. Mote to come to me here? ’

And when the short, stout little woman, who had been the nurse of her childhood and was now her maid, came in answer to the summons, she said hastily: ‘ Motey, I am going to Brighton next week for a few days. I do not intend to go abroad till later. Mr. Winfrith cannot get away just now. He is too busy.’

‘ He always was a busy young gentleman,’ declared the old woman rather sourly, as she took the cloak, the gloves, and the hat of her mistress, and went quietly out of the room.

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CHAPTER V

'There was a Door to which I found no Key:
There was a Veil past which I could not see:
Some little talk awhile of ME and THEE
There seem'd—and then no more of THEE and ME.'
OMAR KHAYYÁM.

'Numero Deus impare gaudet.'
VIRGIL.

I

WHEN the man who remained in local story as the Popish Lord Wantley built Monk's Eype, he planned the arrangements of the lower floor of his villa in a way which was approved by neither his Neapolitan architect nor his English acquaintances.

From the broad terrace overhanging the sea, the row of high narrow windows on either side of the shallow stone steps giving access to the central hall, seemed strictly symmetrical. But there was nothing uniform behind the stately façade. Instead of a suite of reception-rooms opening the one out of the other on either side of the frescoed hall, the whole left side of the villa—excepting the wing, which stretched, as did its fellow, landward, and in which were the servants' quarters—was occupied by one vast apartment.

In this great room the creator of Monk's Eype had gathered together most of his treasures, including the paintings which he had acquired during a long sojourn in Italy; and his Victorian successor had added many beautiful works of art to the collection.

In the Picture Room, as it was called, Penelope's mother always sat when at Monk's Eype, sometimes working at delicate embroidery, oftener writing busily

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at an inlaid ivory table close to one of the windows opening on to the terrace.

On the other side of the circular hall the Italian architect had had his way. Here there was a suite of lofty, well-proportioned rooms opening the one out of the other.

Of these rooms, the first was the dining-room, of which the painted ceiling harmonized with the panels of old Flemish tapestry added to the treasures of Monk's Eype by Penelope's parents. Then came another spacious room, of much the same proportions, which had now been for many years regarded as specially set apart for the use of young Lord Wantley, Mrs. Robinson's cousin and frequent guest. In this pleasant room Wantley read, painted, and smoked, and there also he would entertain those of Penelope's visitors whose sex made him perforce their host. Still, even his occupancy of what some of Mrs. Robinson's friends considered the most agreeable room in the villa was poisoned by a bitter memory. Not long after the death of the man whom he had been taught to call uncle, he had heard his plea for a billiard-table set aside by the new mistress of Monk's Eype with angry decision, and he had been made to feel that he had unwittingly offered an insult to her father's memory.

Beyond Lord Wantley's special quarters there was a third room, more narrow, less well lighted than the others. There were those, nevertheless, who would have regarded it as the most interesting apartment at Monk's Eype, for there the greatest of Victorian philanthropists had worked, spending long hours of his holiday at the large plain knee-table so placed as both to block and to command the one window. Here also hung a portrait which many would have come far to see. If vile as a work of art, it was almost startlingly like the late owner of the room, and this resemblance was the more striking because of the familiar attitude, the left hand supporting the chin,

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which had had for most of the sitter's fellow-countrymen the ridiculous associations of caricature.

Mrs. Robinson disliked both the room and the portrait. But mingled feelings of respect, of affection, and of fear, had caused her to leave the room as it had been during her father's occupancy, and it was only used by her on the rare occasions when she was compelled to have a personal interview with one of her tenants from neighbouring Wyke Regis.

II

On the evening of the day, a Saturday, when Miss Wake's and her niece's arrival had taken place, Lord Wantley had returned somewhat unexpectedly from a visit paid in the neighbourhood, which had been cut short by the sudden illness of the hostess.

After the cheerful, if commonplace, house and party he had just left, Monk's Eype struck him as strangely quiet and depressing, though, as always, the beauty of the villa impressed him anew as he passed through into the circular hall, now flooded with the light of the setting sun.

'I wonder who she has got here now,' he said to himself as he noticed a man's hat, roomy travelling-coat, and stick laid across the top of the Italian marriage-chest, the brilliancy of whose armorial ornaments and bright gilding had been dimmed by a hundred years of the salt wind and soft mists of the Dorset coast.

Mrs. Robinson was fond of entertaining those of her fellow-painters whose work attracted her fancy or excited her admiration, and Wantley's fastidious taste sometimes revolted from the associations into which she thrust him.

The young man's relations to his beautiful cousin were at once singular and natural—best, perhaps, explained by a word said in the frankness of grief

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during the hours which had immediately followed his predecessor's death. 'You know, Penelope,' the heir had said in all good faith, if a little awkwardly—for at that time nothing was definitely known of the famous philanthropist's will, and none doubted that the new peer would find himself to have been treated fairly, if not generously, by the great Lord Wantley—'you know that now you must consider me as your brother; your father himself told me he hoped it would be so.'

The wilful girl had looked at him in silence for a moment, and then, very deliberately, had answered: 'What nonsense! Did my father ever treat you as a son? No, Ludovic, we will go on as we have always done. But if you like'—and she had smiled satirically—'I will look upon you as a kind and well-meaning stepbrother!' And it was with the eyes of a critical, but not unfriendly stepbrother that Wantley came in due course to regard her.

Concerning his cousin's—to his apprehension—extraordinary marriage, he had not been in any way consulted. Indeed, at the time the engagement and marriage took place he had been far away from England; but after Melancthon Robinson's tragic death Penelope for a moment had clung to him as if he had indeed been her brother, showing such real feeling, such acute pain, such bitter distress, that he had come to the conclusion that the tie between the oddly-assorted couple had been at any rate one worthy of respect.

When, somewhat later, Mrs. Robinson had begged Wantley to help her with the complicated business details connected with the Melancthon Settlement, he had drawn back, or rather he had advised her, not unkindly, to hand the work over to one of the great social philanthropic organizations already provided with suitable machinery.

As he had learnt to expect, his cousin entirely dis-

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regarded his advice; instead, she found another to give her the help the head of her family refused her, and this other, as the young man sometimes remembered with an uneasy conscience, was one whom they should both have spared, partly because he was engaged in public affairs which took up what should have been the whole of his working time, partly because he had been the hero of Penelope's first romance, and had once been her accepted lover.

Wantley had watched the renewal of the link between the grave young statesman and his old love with a certain cynical interest.

Penelope had not cared to hide her annoyance and disappointment at her cousin's somewhat pusillanimous refusal of responsibility, and so he had not been asked to take any part in the conferences which were held between David Winfrith and the widow of the philanthropic millionaire; but weeks, months, and even the first years, of Penelope's widowhood wore themselves away, and to Wantley's astonishment the relations between Mrs. Robinson and her adviser and helper remained unchanged.

The Melancthon Settlement went on its way, nominally under the management of its founder's widow, in reality owing everything in it that was practical and worthy of respect to the mind and to the tireless industry of the man who had come to regard this work of supererogation as the principal relaxation of a somewhat austere existence. But Winfrith was not able to conceal from himself the fact that the necessary interviews with his old love were the salt of what was otherwise a laborious and often thankless task.

Of course at one time his marriage with Mrs. Robinson had been regarded as a certainty, but, as the years had gone on, the gossips admitted their mistake, and, according to their fancy, declared either the lovely widow or Winfrith disappointed.

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Alone, Wantley arrived very near the truth. He was sure that there had been no renewal of the offer made and accepted so ardently in the days when the two had been boy and girl; but a subtle instinct warned him that Winfrith still regarded Penelope as nearer to himself than had been, or could ever be, any other woman; and of the many things which he envied his cousin, the young peer counted nothing more precious than the chivalrous interest and affection of the man who most realized his own ideal of the public-spirited Englishman who, born to pleasant fortune, is content to work, both for his country and for his countrymen, for what most would consider an inadequate reward.

David Winfrith's existence formed a contrast to his own life of which Wantley was ashamed. He was well aware that had the other been in his place, even burdened with all his own early disadvantages, Winfrith would by now have made for himself a position in every way befitting that of the successor of such a man as had been Penelope's father.

III

On the evening of his unexpected return to the villa, an evening long to be remembered by him, Wantley dressed early and made his way into the Picture Room. He went expecting to find an ill-assorted party, for Mrs. Robinson was one of those women whose own personal relationship to those whom they gather about them is the only matter of moment, and whose guests are therefore rarely in sympathy one with another.

All that Wantley knew concerning those strangers he was about to meet was that he would be called upon to make himself pleasant to an elderly Roman Catholic spinster, and to her niece, a girl closely associated with the work of the Melancthon Settle-

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ment; and the double prospect was far from being agreeable to him.

He was therefore relieved to find the Picture Room empty, save for the immobile presence of Lady Wantley. She was sitting gazing out of the window, her hands clasped together, absorbed in meditation. As he came in she turned and smiled, but said no word of welcome; and he respected her mood, knowing well that she was one of those who feel the invisible world to be very near, and who believe themselves surrounded by unseen presences.

Lady Wantley's personality had always interested and fascinated the young man. Even as a child he had never sympathized with his mother's dislike of her, for he had early discerned how very different she was from most of the people he knew; and to-night, fresh as he was from the company of cheerful dowagers who were of the earth earthy, this difference was even more apparent to him than usual.

Penelope's mother doubtless owed something of her aloofness of appearance to her singular and picturesque dress, of which the mode had never varied for twenty years and more. The long sweeping skirts of black silk or wool, the cross-over bodice and the lace coif, which almost wholly concealed her banded hair, while not hiding the beautiful shape of her head, had originally been designed for her by the painter to whom, as a younger woman, she had so often sat. Since the great artist had first brought her the drawing of the dress in which he wished once more to paint her, she had never given a thought to the vagaries of fashion, so it came to pass that those about her would have found it impossible to think of her in any other garments than those composing the singular, stately costume which accentuated the mingled severity and mildness of her pale cameo-like face.

After Melancthon Robinson's death, his widow had

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at once made it clear that she had no intention of returning to her mother; but every winter saw the two ladies spending some weeks together in London, and each summer Lady Wantley became her daughter's guest at Monk's Eype.

The rest of the year was spent by the elder woman at Marston Lydiate, the great Somersetshire country-seat to which she had been brought as a bride, and for which she now paid rent to her husband's successor. To Wantley the arrangement had been a painful one. He would have much preferred to let the place to strangers, and he had always refused to go there as Lady Wantley's guest.

As he stood, silent, by one of the high windows of the Picture Room, he remembered suddenly that the next day, August 8th, was his birthday, and that no human being, save a woman who had been his mother's servant for many years, was likely to remember the fact, or to offer him those congratulations which, if futile, always give pleasure. The bitterness of the thought was perhaps the outcome of foolish sentimentality, but it lent a sudden appearance of sternness and of purpose to his face.

Mrs. Robinson, coming into the room at that moment, was struck, for a moment felt disconcerted, by the look on her cousin's face. She was surprised and annoyed that he had returned so soon from the visit which, of course unknown to him, she had herself arranged he should make, in order that he might be absent at the time of the assembling of her ill-assorted guests.

Penelope feared the young man's dispassionate powers of observation; and as she walked down the long room, at the other end of which she saw first her mother's seated figure, and then, standing by one of the long, uncurtained windows, the unwelcome form of her cousin, her heart beat fast, for the little scene with Cecily Wake, added to other matters of more

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moment, had set her nerves jarring. She dreaded the evening before her, feared the betrayal of a secret which she wished to keep profoundly hidden. Still, as was her wont, she met danger halfway.

‘I am glad you are back to-night,’ she said, addressing Wantley, ‘for now you will be able to play host to Sir George Downing. I met him abroad this spring, and he has come here for a few days.’

‘The Persian man?’ She quickly noted that the young man’s voice was full of amused interest and curiosity, nothing more; and, as she nodded her head, assurance and confidence came back.

‘Well, you are certainly a wonderful woman.’ He turned, smiling, to Lady Wantley, who was gazing at her daughter with her usual almost painful tenderness of expression. ‘Penelope’s romantic encounters,’ he said gaily, ‘would fill a book. Such adventures never befall me on my travels. In Spain a fascinating stranger turns out to be Don Carlos in disguise! In Germany she knocks up against Bismarck!’

‘I knew the son!’ she cried, protesting, but not ill-pleased, for she was proud of the good fortune that often befell her during her frequent journeys, of coming across, if not always famous, at least generally interesting and noteworthy people.

‘And now,’ concluded Wantley, ‘the lion whom most people—unofficial people of course I mean’—he spoke significantly—‘are all longing to see and to entertain, is bound to her chariot wheels!’

‘Ah!’ she cried eagerly, ‘but that’s just the point: he has a horror of being lionized. He’s promised to write a report, and I suggested that he should come and do it here, where there’s no fear of his being run to earth by the wrong kind of people. I don’t suppose Theresa Wake knows there’s such a person in the world as “Persian Downing.”’

‘And the niece, the young lady who is to be my special charge?’ Wantley was still smiling. ‘She’s

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sure to know something about him—that is, if you take in a daily paper at the Settlement.’

‘Cecily?’ Mrs. Robinson’s voice softened. ‘Dear little Cecily won’t trouble her head about him at all.’ She turned away quickly as Lady Wantley’s gentle, insistent voice floated across the room to where the two cousins were standing.

‘George Downing? I remember your father bringing a youth called by that name to our house, many years ago, when you were a child, my love.’ She hesitated, as if seeking to remember something which only half lingered in her memory.

Her daughter waited in painful silence. ‘Would the ghost of that old story of disgrace and pain never be laid?’ she asked herself rebelliously.

But Lady Wantley was not the woman to recall a scandal, even had she been wont to recall such things, of one who was now under her daughter’s roof. Her next words were, however, if a surprise, even less welcome to one of her listeners than would have been those she expected to hear.

‘There was an American Mrs. Downing, a lady who came with an introduction to see your father. She wished to consult him about a home for emigrant children, and I heard—now what did I hear?’ Again Lady Wantley paused.

Mrs. Robinson straightened her well-poised head.

‘You probably heard, mamma, what is, I believe, true: that Lady Downing, as she is of course now, is not on good terms with her husband. They parted almost immediately after their marriage, and I believe that they have not met for years.’

Wantley looked at his cousin with some surprise; she spoke impetuously, a note of deep feeling in her voice, and as if challenging contradiction. Then, suddenly, she held up her hand with a quick warning gesture.

Her ears had caught the sound of footsteps for

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whose measured tread she had learnt to listen, and a moment later the door opened, and the man of whom they had been speaking, advancing into the great room, stood before them.

IV

Few of us realize how very differently our physical appearance and peculiarities strike each one of any new circle of persons to whose notice we are introduced; and, according to whether we are humble-minded or the reverse, the results of such inspection, were they suddenly revealed, would surprise or amaze us.

When Sir George Downing came forward to greet his hostess, and to be introduced to her mother and to her cousin, his outer man impressed each of them with direct and almost startling vividness. But in each case the impression produced was a very different one.

The first point which struck Lady Wantley in the tall, loosely-built figure was its remaining look of youth, of strength of will, and of purpose. This woman, to whom the things of the body were of such little moment, yet saw how noteworthy was the brown sun-burnt face, with its sharply-outlined features, and she gathered a very clear impression of the distinction and power of the man who bowed over her hand with old-fashioned courtesy and deference; more, she felt that there had been a time in her life when her daughter's guest would have attracted and interested her to a singular degree.

As he raised his head, their eyes met—deep-sunk, rather light-grey eyes, in some ways singularly alike, as Penelope had perceived with a certain shock of surprise, very soon after her first meeting with Sir George Downing. As these eyes, so curiously similar, met for a moment, fixedly, Downing, with a tightening of the heart, said to himself: 'She I must count an enemy.'

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Lord Wantley, as he came forward to meet the distinguished stranger to whom he had just been told he must play host, observed him at once more superficially, and yet more narrowly and in greater detail, than Penelope's mother had done.

In the pleasant country-house — of the world worldly—from which Wantley had come, the man before him had been the subject of eager, amused discussion.

One of the talkers had known him as a youth, and had some recollection (of which he made the most) of the romantic circumstances which had attended his disgrace. His return was generally approved, all hoped to meet him, and even, vaguely, to benefit in purse by so doing; but it had been agreed that the recent change of Government lessened Downing's chances of persuading the Foreign Office to carry out the policy which he was known to have much at heart, and on which so many moneyed interests depended. It was said that the Prime Minister had refused to see him, that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had left town to avoid him! On the other hand, a lady present had heard, 'on the best authority,' that he had not been in England two days before he had been sent for by the Sovereign, with whom he had had a long private talk.

It was further declared that 'the city,' that mysterious potentate, more powerful nowadays than any Sovereign, held him in high esteem, regarding him as a benefactor to that race of investors who like to think that they have Imperial as well as personal interests at heart. And even those who deprecated the fact that one holding no official post should be allowed to influence the policy of their country, admitted that, in the past, England had owed much to such men as Persian Downing. 'Yes, but in these days the soldier of fortune has been replaced by the banker of fortune,' an ex-diplomatist had observed,

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and the *mot* had been allowed to pass without challenge.

‘And so,’ thought Wantley, remembering the things which had been said, ‘this is Persian Downing!’

The lean, powerful figure, habited in old-fashioned dress-clothes, looked older than he had imagined the famous man could be. The bushy, dark-brown moustache, streaked with strands of white hair, and the luminous grey eyes, penthoused under singularly straight eyebrows, gave a worn and melancholy cast to the whole countenance.

The younger man also noticed that Downing’s hands and feet were exceptionally small, considering his great height. ‘I wonder if he will like me,’ he said to himself, and this, it must be admitted, was generally Wantley’s first thought; but he no longer felt as he had done but a few moments before, listless and discontented with life—indeed, so keenly interested had he, in these few moments, become in Penelope’s famous guest that he scarcely noticed the entrance into the room of the young girl of whom his cousin had spoken, and whom she had specially commended to his good offices.

Dressed in a plain white muslin frock, presenting her aunt’s excuses in a low, even voice, Cecily Wake suggested to Lady Wantley, who had never seen her before, the comparison, when standing by Penelope, of a snowdrop with a rose. Perhaps this thought passed in some subtle way to Wantley’s mind, for it was not till he happened to glance at the girl, across the round table which formed an oasis in the tapestry-hung dining-room, that he became aware that there was something attractive, and even unusual, in the round childish face and sincere, unquestioning eyes.

None of the party, save perhaps Wantley himself, possessed the art of small-talk. Penelope was strangely silent. ‘Even she,’ her cousin thought with a certain

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satisfaction, 'is impressed by this remarkable man, who has done her the honour of coming here.'

Then he asked himself, none too soon, what had brought Persian Downing to Monk's Eype? The obvious explanation, that Downing had been attracted by the personality of one who was universally admitted to have an almost uncannily compelling charm, when she cared to exercise it, he rejected as too evident to be true.

Wantley thought he knew his beautiful cousin through and through; yet in truth there were many chambers of her heart where any sympathetic stranger might have easy access, but the doors of which were tightly locked when Wantley passed that way. Like most men, he found it difficult to believe that a woman lacking all subtle attraction for himself could possibly attract those of his own sex whom he favoured with his particular regard. David Winfrith was the exception which always proves a rule, and Wantley admitted unwillingly that in that case there was some excuse; for here, at any rate, had been on Penelope's part a moment of response. But to-night, and for many days to come, he was strangely, and, as he often reminded himself in later life, foolishly, culpably blind.

Gradually the conversation turned on that still so secret and mysterious country with which Sir George Downing was now intimately connected. His slow voice, even, toneless, as is so often that of those who have lived long in the East, acted, Wantley soon found, as a complete screen, when he chose that it should be so, to his thoughts.

Suddenly, and, as it appeared, in no connection with what had just been said at the moment, Lady Wantley, turning to Downing, observed, 'I perceive that you have a number-led mind?'

Penelope looked up apprehensively, but her brow cleared as the man to whom had been addressed

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this singular remark replied simply and deferentially:

‘If you mean that certain days are marked in my life, it is certainly so. Matters of moment are connected in my mind with the number seven.’

Wantley and Cecily Wake both looked at the speaker with extreme astonishment. ‘I felt sure that it was so!’ exclaimed Lady Wantley. ‘Seven has also always been my number, but the knowledge inspires me with no fear or horror. It simply makes me aware that my times are in our Father’s hands.’ She added, in a lower voice: ‘All predestination is centralized in God’s elect, and all concurrent wills of the creature are thereunto subordinated.’

‘He may be odd, but he must certainly think us odder,’ thought Wantley, not without enjoyment.

But a cloud had come over Penelope’s face. ‘Mamma!’ she said anxiously, and then again, ‘Mamma!’

‘I think he knows what I mean,’ said Lady Wantley, fixing the grey eyes which seemed to see at once so much and so little on the face of her daughter’s guest.

Again, to Wantley’s surprise, Downing answered at once, and gravely enough: ‘Yes, I think I do know what you mean, and on the whole I agree.’

Mrs. Robinson, glancing at her cousin with what he thought a look of appeal, threw a pebble, very deliberately, into the deep pool where they all suddenly found themselves. ‘Do you really believe in lucky numbers?’ she asked flippantly.

Downing looked at her fixedly for a moment. ‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘and also in unlucky numbers.’

‘I hope,’ she cried—and as she spoke she reddened deeply—‘that your first meeting with David Winfrith will take place on one of your lucky days. He is believed to have more influence concerning the matter you are interested in just now than anyone else, for he claims to have studied the question on the spot.’

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‘Ah!’ thought Wantley, pleased as a man always is to receive what he believes to be the answer to a riddle; ‘I know now what has brought Persian Downing to Monk’s Eype!’ and he also took up the ball.

‘Winfrith claims,’ he said, ‘to have made Persia his special study. I believe he once spent six weeks there, on the strength of which he wrote a book. You probably came across him when he was in Teheran.’

But as he spoke he was aware that in Winfrith’s book there was no mention of Downing, and that though at the time of the writer’s sojourn in Persia no other Englishman had wielded there so great a power, or so counteracted influences inimical to his country’s interests.

‘No, I did not see him there. At the time of Mr. Winfrith’s stay in Teheran’—Downing spoke with an indifference the other thought studied—‘I was in America, where I have to go from time to time to see my partners.’ He added, with a smile: ‘I think you are mistaken in saying that Mr. Winfrith only spent six weeks in Persia. In any case, his book is good—very good.’

‘I suppose,’ said Wantley, turning to his cousin, ‘that you have arranged for Winfrith to come over to-morrow, or Monday?’

‘Oh no,’ she answered hurriedly. ‘He is going to be away for the next few days; after that, perhaps, Sir George Downing will meet him.’ She spoke awkwardly, and Wantley felt he had been clumsy. But he thought that now he thoroughly understood what had happened. Winfrith had evidently no wish to meet informally the man whom his chief had not been willing to receive. Doubtless Penelope had done her best to bring her important new friend in contact with her old friend. She had failed, hence her awkward, hesitating answer to his question. But the young man knew his cousin, and the potency of her

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spell over obstinate Winfrith; he had no doubt that within a week the two men would have met under her roof, 'though whether the meeting will lead to anything,' he said to himself, 'remains to be seen.'

Wantley was, however, quite wrong. During the hours which Mrs. Robinson had spent that day riding with the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, the name of Persian Downing had not once been mentioned, and at this very moment David Winfrith, playing, after an early dinner, a game of chess with his old father, saw in imagination his lovely friend acting as kind hostess to her mother, for whom he himself had never felt any particular liking, and to Miss Wake and her niece, against both of whom he had an unreasonable prejudice. Lord Wantley he believed to be still away; and, as he allowed his father to checkmate him, he felt a pang of annoyance at the thought that he himself was going to be absent during days of holiday which might have been so much better employed, in part at least, in Penelope's company. Not for many months, not, when he came to think of it, for some two years, had Mrs. Robinson been at once so joyously high-spirited and yet so submissive, so intimately confidential while yet so willing to take advice—in a word, so enchantingly near to himself, as she had been that day, riding along the narrow lanes which lay in close network behind the bare cliffs and hills bounding the coast.

But to Wantley, doing the honours of his smoking room to Sir George Downing, and later when taking him out to the terrace where Mrs. Robinson and Cecily were pacing up and down in the twilight, the presence of this distinguished visitor at Monk's Eype was fully explained by the fact that Winfrith was not only the near neighbour, but also the very good friend, of Mrs. Robinson, and, the young man ventured to think, of himself.

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CHAPTER VI

' Qui, la moitié et la plus belle moitié de la vie est cachée à l'homme qui n'a pas aimé avec passion.'—STENDHAL.

' Madrid la antesala del cielo.'

Spanish Saying.

I

ABOVE, close to the window of a high narrow room which had once been the Catholic Lord Wantley's oratory, and which was next to the bedroom always occupied by Penelope herself, sat in the darkness Mrs. Mote.

The window directly overlooked the flagged terrace, the leafy scented gardens, and the sea, and there were members of Mrs. Robinson's household who considered it highly unfitting that an apartment so pleasantly situated should be the 'own room' of the plain, sturdy little woman who, after having been Penelope Wantley's devoted and skilful nurse for close on twenty years, had been promoted on her nursling's marriage to be her less skilful but equally devoted maid.

Mrs. Mote had never been what we are wont to call a pleasant woman. She was over thirty when she had first entered Lord and Lady Wantley's service as nurse to their only child, and as the years had gone on her temper had not improved, and her manner had not become more conciliating. Even in the days when Penelope had been a nervous, highly-strung little girl, Lady Wantley had had much to bear from 'Motey,' as the nurse had been early named by the child. Very feminine, under a hard, unprepossessing

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exterior which recalled that of Noah's wife in Penelope's old-fashioned Noah's ark, Motey instinctively disliked all those women—and, alas! there were many such, below and above stairs—who were more attractive than herself.

Lady Wantley, beautiful, beloved, and enjoying, even among many of the servant's own sort, a reputation for austere goodness and spiritual perfection, was for long years the object of poor Motey's special aversion. Singularly reticent, and taking pride in 'keeping herself to herself,' the woman never betrayed her feelings, or rather she did so in such small and intangible ways as were never suspected by the person most closely concerned. Lady Wantley recognised the woman's undoubted devotion to the child to whom she was herself so devoted, and she simply regarded Mrs. Mote's sullen though never disrespectful behaviour to herself as one of those unfortunate peculiarities of manner and temper which often accompany sterling worth. Lord Wantley had been so far old-fashioned that he disliked going anywhere without his wife, and the mother had felt great solace to leave her daughter in such sure hands; but she had sacrificed excellent maids of her own, and innumerable under-servants, to the nurse's peculiar temper and irritability.

There had been a moment, Penelope being then about seventeen, when Mrs. Mote's supremacy had trembled in the balance. The trusted nurse had played a certain part in the girl's first love affair, acting with a secretiveness, a lack of proper confidence in her master and mistress, which had made them both extremely displeased and angry, and there had been some question as to whether she should remain in their service. Mrs. Mote never forgot having overheard a short conversation between the head-strong girl and her mother. 'If you tell me it must be so, I will give up David Winfrith,' Penelope had

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declared, sobbing bitterly the while; 'but if you send Motey away I will throw myself into the sea!'

All this was now, however, ancient history. Mrs. Mote had been forgiven her plunge into vicarious romance, and a day had come, not, however, till after Lord Wantley's death, when Penelope's mother had admitted to herself that perhaps Motey had been more clear-sighted than herself. In any case, the old nurse had firmly established her position as a member of the family. She and Lady Wantley had grown old together, and even before Penelope's marriage the servant had learnt to regard her mistress not only with a certain affection, but with what she had before been unwilling to give her—namely, real respect. To her master she had always been warmly attached, and she mourned him sincerely, being pathetically moved when she learnt that he had left her, as 'a token of regard and gratitude,' the sum of five hundred pounds.

The phrase had touched her more than the money had done. Motey, as are so many servants, was lavishly generous, and she had helped with her legacy several worthless relations of her own to start small businesses which invariably failed. These losses, however, she bore with great philosophy. Her home was wherever her darling, her 'young lady,' her 'ma'am,' happened to be, and her circle that of the family with whose fortunes hers had now been bound up for so many years.

Mrs. Robinson's faithful affection for this old servant was one of the best traits in a somewhat capricious if generous character, the more so that the maid by no means always approved of even her mistress's most innocent actions and associates. Thus, she had first felt a rough contempt, and later a fierce dislike, of poor Melancthon Robinson.

There were two people, both men, whom Motey would have been willing to see more often with her mistress.

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The one was David Winfrith, who, if now a successful, almost it might be said a famous man, had played a rather inglorious part in Penelope's first love affair. The other was young Lord Wantley, of whom the old nurse had constituted herself the champion in the days when her master and mistress had merely regarded the presence of the nervous, sensitive boy as an unpleasant duty.

Mrs. Mote's liking for these two young men was completely subordinate to her love for her nursling; she would cheerfully have seen either of them undergo the most unpleasant ordeal had Penelope thereby been saved the smallest pain or hurt. In fact, it was because she well knew how staunch a friend Winfrith could be, and how useful, in perhaps a slightly whimsical way, Lord Wantley had more than once proved himself in his cousin's service, that she would have preferred to see more of these two and less of certain others.

Ah, those others! There had always been a side of Mrs. Robinson's nature which thirsted for sentimental adventure, and yet of the three women who in their several ways loved her supremely—her mother, Cecily Wake, and the old nurse—only the last was really aware of this craving for romantic encounter. Mrs. Mote had too often found herself compelled to stand inactive in the wings of the stage on which her mistress was wont to take part in mimic, but none the less dangerous, combat, for her to remain ignorant of many things, not only unsuspected, but in a sense unthinkable, by either the austere mother or the girl friend.

Perhaps this blindness in those who yet loved her well was owing to the fact that, in the ordinary sense of the term, Penelope was no flirt. Indeed, those among her friends who belonged to a society which, if overcivilized, is perhaps the more ready to extend a large measure of sympathy to those of its number who feel an overmastering impulse to revert, in affairs of the

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heart, to primitive nature, regarded the beautiful widow as singularly free from the temptations with which they were themselves so sorely beset.

Doubtless because she was herself so physically perfect, physical perfection held for Penelope none of that potent, beckoning appeal it so often holds for even the most refined and intelligent women. Rather had she always been attracted, tempted, in a certain sense conquered, by the souls of those with whom her passion for romance brought her into temporary relation. Even as a girl she had disdained easy conquest, and at all times she had been, when dealing with men, as a skilful musician who only cares to play on the finest instruments. Often she was surprised and disturbed, even made indignant, both by the harmonies and by the discords she thus produced; and sometimes, again, she made a mistake concerning the quality of the human instrument under her hand.

II

As Mrs. Mote sat by her open window, her eyes seeking to distinguish among those walking on the terrace below the upright, graceful form of her mistress, she deliberately let her thoughts wander back to certain passages in her own and Mrs. Robinson's joint lives. In moments of danger we recall our hairbreadth escapes with a certain complacency; they induce a sense of sometimes false security, and just now this old woman, who loved Penelope so dearly, felt very much afraid.

The memory of two episodes came to still her fears. Though both long past, perhaps forgotten by Penelope, to Mrs. Mote they returned to-night with strange, uncomfortable vividness.

The hero of the one had been a Frenchman, of the other a Spaniard.

As for the Frenchman, Motey thought of him with a

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certain kindness, and even with regret, though he, too, as she put it to herself, had 'given her a good fright.' The meeting between the Comte de Lucque and Mrs. Robinson had taken place not very long after Melancthon Robinson's death, in that enchanted borderland which seems at once Switzerland and Italy.

The French lad—he was little more—was stranded there in search of health, and Penelope had soon felt for him that pity which, while so little akin to love, so often induces love in the creature pitied. She allowed, nay, encouraged, him to be her companion on long painting expeditions, and he soon 'made his way through, as others had done before him, to the outer ramparts of her heart.

For a while she had found him charming, at once so full of surprising naïvetés and of strange, ardent enthusiasms; so utterly unlike the younger Englishman of her acquaintance and differing also greatly from the Frenchmen she had known.

Brought up between a widowed mother and a monk tutor, the young Count was in some ways as ignorant and as enthusiastic as must have been that ancestor of his who started with St. Louis from Aiguesmortes, bound for Jerusalem. His father had been killed in the great charge of the Cuirassiers at the Battle of Reichofen, and Penelope discovered that he above all things wished to live and to become strong, in order that he might take a part in 'La Revanche,' that fantasy which played so great a rôle in the imagination of those Frenchmen belonging to his generation.

But when one evening Mrs. Robinson asked suddenly, 'Motey, how would you like to see me become a French Countess?' the nurse had not taken the question as put seriously, as, indeed, it had not been. Still, even the old servant, who regarded the fact of any man's being made what she quaintly called 'uncomfortable' by her mistress as a small, well-

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merited revenge for all the indignities heaped by his sex on hers—even Motey felt sorry for the Count when the inevitable day of parting came.

At first, Penelope read with some attention the long, closely-written letters which reached her day by day with faithful regularity, but there came a time when she was absorbed in the details of a small exhibition of the very latest manifestations of French art, and the Count's letters were scarcely looked at before they were thrown aside. Then, suddenly he made abrupt and most unlooked-for intrusion into Mrs. Robinson's life, at a time when the old nurse was accustomed to expect freedom from Penelope's studies in sentiment—that is, during the few weeks of the years which were always spent by Mrs. Robinson working hard in the studio of some great Paris artist.

Penelope had known how to organize her working life very intelligently; she so timed her visits to Paris as to arrange with a French painter, who was, like herself, what the unkind would call a wealthy amateur, to take over his flat, his studio, and his servants.

During nine happy weeks each spring Mrs. Robinson lived the busy Bohemian life which she loved, and which, she thought, suited her so well; but Mrs. Mote was never neglected, or, at least, never allowed herself to feel so, and occasionally her mistress found her a useful, if over-vigilant, chaperon. Mrs. Mote was on very good terms with the French servants with whom she was thus each year thrown into contact. Their easy gaiety beguiled even her grim ill-temper, and, fortunately, she never conceived the dimmest suspicion of the fact that they were all firmly persuaded that she was the humble, but none the less authentic, 'mère de madame'!

Now in the spring following her stay in Switzerland, not many days after she had settled down to work

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in Paris, Mrs. Robinson desired the excellent *maître d'hôtel* to inform Mrs. Mote that she was awaited in the studio. 'Motey, you remember the French count we met in Switzerland last year?' Before giving the maid time to answer, she continued: 'Well, I heard from him this morning. He asks me to go and see him. He says he is very ill, and I want you to come with me.' Penelope spoke in the hurried way usual to her when moved by real feeling.

Then, when the two were seated side by side in one of the comfortable, shabby, open French cabs, of which even Mrs. Mote recognized the charm, Penelope added suddenly: 'Motey—you don't think—do you doubt he is really ill? It would be a shabby trick——'

'All gentlemen, as far as I'm aware, ma'am, do shabby tricks sometimes. There's that saying, "All's fair in love and war"; it's very advantageous to them. I don't suppose the Count's heard it, though; he knew very little English, poor young fellow!' But Motey might have spoken more strongly had she realized how very passive was to be on this occasion her rôle of duenna.

At last the fiacre stopped opposite a narrow door let into a high blank wall forming the side of one of those lonely quiet streets, almost ghostly in their sunny stillness, which may yet be found in certain quarters of modern Paris. Penelope gave her companion the choice of waiting for her in the carriage or of walking up and down. Mrs. Mote did not remonstrate with her mistress; she simply and sulkily expressed great distrust of Paris cabmen in general, and her preference for the pavement in particular. Then, with some misgiving, she saw Mrs. Robinson ring the bell. The door in the wall swung back, framing a green lawn, edged with bushes of blossoming lilac, against which Penelope's white serge gown was silhouetted for a brief moment, before the bright vision was shut out.

First walking, then standing, on the other side of

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the street, finally actually sitting on the edge of the pavement, but not before she had assured herself even in the midst of her perturbation of spirit that it was spotlessly clean, the old nurse waited during what seemed to her an eternity of time, and went through what was certainly an agony of fright.

The worst kind of fear is unreasoning. Mrs. Mote's imagination conjured up every horror; and nothing but the curious lack of initiative which seems common to those who have lived in servitude held her back from doing something undoubtedly foolish.

At last, when she was making up her mind to something very desperate indeed, though what form this desperate something should take she could not determine, there fell on her ears, coming nearer and nearer, the sound of deep sobbing. A few moments later the little green door, opening slowly, revealed two figures, that of Mrs. Robinson, pale and moved, but otherwise looking much as usual, and that of a stout, middle-aged woman, dressed in black, who, crying bitterly, clung to her, seeming loth to let her go.

Very gently, and not till they were actually standing on the pavement outside the open door, did Penelope disengage herself from the trembling hands which sought to keep her. Motey did not understand the words, ' *Mon pauvre enfant, il vous aime tant! Vous reviendrez demain, n'est ce pas, madame?* ' but she understood enough to say no word of her long waiting, to give voice to no grumbling, as she and her mistress walked slowly down the sunny street, after having seen the little green door shut behind the short, homely figure, lacking all dignity save that of grief.

In those days, as Mrs. Mote, sitting up there remembering in the darkness, recalled with bitterness, Mrs. Robinson had had no confidante but her old nurse, and Penelope had instantly begun pouring out, as was her wont, the tale of all that had happened in the hour she had been away.

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‘Oh, Motey, that is his poor mother! It is so horribly sad. He is her only child. Her husband was killed in the Franco-Prussian War when she was quite a young woman, and she has given up her whole life to him. Now the poor fellow is dying’—Penelope shuddered—‘and I have promised to go and see him every day till he does die.’

III

It was with no feeling of pity that Mrs. Mote now turned in her own mind to the second episode.

A journey to Madrid in search of pictured dons and high hidalgos had led Mrs. Robinson to make the acquaintance of a Spanish gentleman, a certain Don José Moricada; and the old Englishwoman, with her healthy contempt of extravagance of behaviour and language, could now smile grimly as she evoked the striking individuality of the man who had given her the worst quarter of an hour she had ever known.

At the time of their first meeting Don José had seemed to Penelope to embody in his single person all the qualities which may be supposed to have animated the noble models whose good fortune it was to be immortalized by Velasquez; indeed, he ultimately proved himself possessed to quite an inconvenient degree of the passion and living fervour which the great artist, who was of all painters Penelope’s most admired master, could so subtly convey.

With restrained ardour the Don had placed himself, almost at their first meeting, at the beautiful Englishwoman’s disposal, and Penelope had seldom met with a more intelligent and unobtrusive cicerone. At his bidding the heavy doors of old Madrid mansions, embowered in gardens, and hidden behind gates which had never opened even to the most courteous of strangers, swung back, revealing treasures hitherto

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jealously hidden from the foreign lover of Spanish art. Together they had journeyed to the Escorial in leisurely old-world fashion, driving along the arid roads and stony tracks so often traversed at mule gallop by Philip of Arragon; and the mouldering courts of the great death-haunted palace through which her Spanish gallant led Mrs. Robinson had rarely seen the passage of a better contrasted couple.

Softer hours were spent in the deserted scented gardens of Buen Retiro, and not once did the Spaniard imply by word or gesture that he expected his companion's assent to the significant Spanish proverb, *Dame ye darte he* (Give to me, and I will give to thee).

Penelope had never enjoyed a more delicate and inconsequent romance, or a more delightful interlude in what was then a life overfull of unsought pleasures and of interests sprung upon it. In those days Mrs. Robinson had not found herself. She was even then still tasting, with a certain fearfulness, the joys of complete freedom, and those who always lie in wait, even if innocently, to profit by such freedoms, soon called her insistently back to England.

They had an abettor in Mrs. Mote, whose long-suffering love of her mistress had seldom been more tried than during the sojourn in Spain, spent by the maid in gloomy hotel solitude, or, more unpleasing still, in company where she felt herself regarded by the Spaniard as an intolerable and somewhat grotesque duenna, and by her mistress as a bore, to be endured for kindness' sake. But the boredom of her old nurse's companionship was not one which Penelope often felt called upon to share with her indefatigable cavalier, and, as there came a time when Don José and Mrs. Robinson seemed to the old nurse to be scarcely ever apart, Mrs. Mote often felt both angry and lonely.

Suddenly Penelope grew tired, not of Spain, but of Madrid, perhaps also of her Spanish friend, especially when she discovered, with annoyance, that he had

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arranged, if not to accompany her, at least to travel on the same days as herself first to Toledo, and thence to Seville. Also something else had happened which had proved very distasteful to Mrs. Robinson.

The English Ambassador, an old friend of her parents, and a man who, as he had begun by reminding Penelope at the outset of their detestable conversation, was almost old enough to be her grandfather, had called on Mrs. Robinson and said a word of caution.

The word was carefully chosen; for the old gentleman was not only a diplomatist, but he had lived in Spain so many years that he had caught some of the Spanish elusiveness of language and courtesy of phrase. Penelope, with reddening cheek, had at first made the mistake of affecting to misunderstand him. Then, with British bluntness, he had spoken out. 'Spaniards are not Englishmen, my dear young lady. You met your new friend at my house, and so I feel a certain added responsibility. Of course, I know you have been absolutely discreet; still, I feel the time has come when I should warn you. These Spanish fellows when in love sometimes give a lot of trouble.' He had jerked the sentence out, angry with her, angrier perhaps with himself.

The day before Mrs. Robinson was leaving Madrid, and not, as she somewhat coldly informed Don José Moricada, for Toledo, there was a question of one last expedition.

On the outskirts of the town, in an old house reputed to have been at one time the country residence of that French Ambassador, Monsieur de Villars, whose wife had left so vivid an account of seventeenth-century Madrid, were to be seen a magnificent collection of paintings and studies by Goya. According to tradition, they had been painted during the enchanted period of the Don Juanesque artist's love passages with the Duchess of Alba, and very early in her

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acquaintance with the Spaniard Penelope had expressed a strong desire to see work done by the great painter under such romantic and unusual circumstances. And Don José had been at considerable pains to obtain the absent owner's permission. His request had been acceded to only after a long delay, and at a moment when Mrs. Robinson had become weary both of Madrid and of her Spanish gallant's company.

It seemed, however, churlish to refuse to avail herself of a favour obtained with so much difficulty. For awhile she had hesitated; not only did the warning of the old Ambassador still sound most unpleasantly in her ears, but of late there had come something less restrained, more ardent, in the attitude of the Spaniard, proving only too significantly how right the old Englishman had been. But even were she to return another year to Madrid, the opportunity of visiting this curious old house and its, to her, most notable contents, was not likely to recur.

The appointment for the visit to Los Francias was therefore made and kept; but when Don José, himself driving the splendid English horses of which he was so proud, called at the hotel for Mrs. Robinson, he found, to his angry astonishment, that her old nurse, the maid he so disliked, was to be of the company.

During the drive, Mrs. Mote, in high good-humour at her approaching release from Madrid, noticed with satisfaction that her mistress's Spanish friend seemed preoccupied and gloomy, though Mrs. Robinson's high spirits and apparent pleasure in the picturesque streets and byways they passed through might well have proved infectious.

At last Los Francias was reached; and after walking through deserted, scented gardens, where Nature was disregarding, with triumphant success, the Bourbon formality of myrtle hedges, marble fountains, and sunk parterres, the ill-assorted trio found themselves

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being ushered by a man-servant, with great ceremony, into a large vestibule situated in the centre of a house recalling rather a French château than a Spanish country-house.

In answer to a muttered word from the Spaniard, Mrs. Mote heard her mistress answer decidedly: 'My maid would much prefer to come with us than to stay here with a man of whose language she doesn't know a word. Besides, this is *not* the last time. I hope to come back some day, and you will surely visit England.'

On hearing these words Don José had turned and looked at his beautiful companion with a curious gleam in his small, narrow-lidded eyes, and a foreboding had come to the old servant.

The high rooms, opening the one into the other, still contained shabby pieces of fine old French furniture, of which the faded gilding and moth-eaten tapestries contrasted oddly with the vivid, strangely living paintings which seemed ready to leap from the walls above them. The heavy stillness, the utter emptiness, of the great salons oddly affected the old Englishwoman, walking behind the other two; she felt a vague misgiving, and was more than ever glad to remember that in a few days Mrs. Robinson would have left Madrid.

Suddenly, when strolling through the largest, and apparently the last of the whole suite of rooms, Mrs. Mote missed her mistress and Don José.

Had they gone forward or turned back? She looked round her, utterly bewildered, then spied in the wall a narrow aperture to which admission was apparently given by a hinged panel, hung, as was the rest of the salon, with red brocade.

This, then, was where and how the other two had disappeared. She felt relieved, even a little ashamed of her unreasoning fear.

For a moment she hesitated, then stepped through the aperture into a narrow corridor, shaped like an S,

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and characteristic—but Motey knew nothing of this—of French château architecture; for these curiously narrow passages, tucked away in the thickness of the wall, form a link between the state rooms of many a great palace and the ‘little apartments’ arranged for their owner’s daily and familiar use.

The inner twist of the S-shaped corridor was quite dark, but very soon Mrs. Mote found that the passage terminated with an ordinary door, through which, the upper half being glazed, she saw her mistress and the Spaniard engaged in an apparently very animated conversation.

The room in which stood the two she sought was almost ludicrously unlike those to which it was so closely linked by the passage in which the onlooker was standing. Perhaps the present owner of the old house, or more probably his wife, had found the Goyas oppressive company, for here no pictures hung on brocaded walls; instead, the round, domed room, lighted only from above, was lined with a gay modern wall-paper, of which the design simulated a fruitful vine, trained against green trellis-work. Modern French basket furniture, the worse for wear, was arranged about a circular marble fountain, which, let into the tiled floor, must have afforded coolness on the hottest day.

Memories of former occupants, and of another age, were conjured up by a First Empire table, pushed back against the wall; and opposite the door behind which the old nurse stood peering was the entrance, wide open, to a darkened room, while just inside this room Mrs. Mote was surprised to see a curious sign of actual occupancy—a small, spider-legged table, on which stood a decanter of white wine, a plate of chocolate cakes, and a gold bowl full of roses.

But these things were rather remembered later, for at the time the old woman’s whole attention was centred on her mistress and the latter’s companion.

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Mrs. Robinson, her back turned to the darkened room beyond, was standing by a slender marble pillar, rimmed at the top with a tarnished gilt railing; a long grey silk cloak and boat-shaped hat, covered with white ostrich feathers, accentuated her tall slenderness, for in these early days of widowhood Penelope was exquisitely, miraculously slender. With head bent and eyes cast down, she seemed to be listening, embarrassed and ashamed, to Don José Moricada. One arm and hand, the latter holding a glove, rested on the marble pillar, and her whole figure, if instinct with proud submissiveness, breathed angry, embarrassed endurance.

As for the Spaniard, always sober of gesture, his arms folded across his breast in the dignified fashion first taught to short men by Napoleon, he seemed to be pouring out a torrent of eager, impassioned words, every sentence emphasized by an imperious glance from the bright dark eyes, which, as Mrs. Mote did not fail to remind herself, had always inspired her with distrust.

The unseen spectator of the singular scene also divined the protestations, the entreaties, the reproaches, which were being uttered in a language of which she could not understand one word.

For a few moments she felt pity, even a certain measure of sympathy for the man. To her thinking—and Mrs. Mote had her own ideas about most matters—Penelope had brought this torrent of words and reproaches on herself; but when the old nurse heard the voice of the Spaniard become more threatening and less appealing, when she saw Mrs. Robinson suddenly turn and face him, her head thrown back, her blue eyes wide open with something even Motey had never seen in them before—for till that day Penelope and Fear had never met—then the onlooker felt the lesson had indeed lasted long enough, and that, even at the risk of angering her mistress, the

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time had come when she should interfere. Her hand sought and found the handle of the door. She turned and twisted it this way and that, but the door remained fast, and suddenly she realized that Penelope was a prisoner.

In this primitive, but none the less potent, way had the Spaniard made himself, in one sense at least, master of the situation—the old eternal situation between the man pursuing and the woman fleeing.

Caring little whether she was now seen or not, Mrs. Mote pressed her face closely to the glass pane. She looked at the lithe sinewy figure of Penelope's companion with a curiously altered feeling; a great sinking of the heart had taken the place of the pity and contempt of only a moment before.

For awhile neither Penelope nor Don José saw the face behind the door. Mrs. Robinson had turned away, and had begun walking slowly round the domed hall, her companion following her, but keeping his distance. At last, when passing for the second time the open door leading to the darkened room beyond, she had looked up, uttered an exclamation of angry disgust, and had slackened her footsteps, while he, quickening his, had decreased the space between them. . . .

When, in later life, Penelope unwillingly recalled the scene, her memory preferred to dwell on the grotesque rather than on the sinister side of the episode. But at the moment of ordeal—ah, then her whole being became very literally absorbed in supplication to the dead two who when living had never failed her: her father and Melancthon Robinson.

They may have been permitted to respond, or perhaps a more explicable cause may have brought about a revival of pride and good feeling in the Spanish gentleman; for when there came release it seemed as if Mrs. Mote was the unwitting *dea ex machina*.

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The two, moving within panther and doe wise, both saw, simultaneously, the plain, homely face of Mrs. Robinson's old nurse staring in upon them, and the sight, affording the woman infinite comfort and courage, seemed to withdraw all power from the man, for very slowly, with apparent reluctance, Don José Moricada turned on his heel, and unlocked the door.

The maid did not reply to the rebuke, uttered in a low tone, 'Oh, Motey, we've been waiting for you such a long time.' Instead, she turned to the Spaniard. 'My lady is tired, sir. Surely you've showed her enough by now.'

He bent his head, silently opening again the glazed door and waiting for them to pass through, as his only answer.

But Penelope's nerve had gone. She was clutching her old nurse's arm with desperate tightening fingers. 'I can't go through there, Motey, unless'—she spoke almost inaudibly—'unless you can make him walk through first.'

Mrs. Mote was quite equal to the occasion. 'Will you please go on, sir? My mistress is nervous of the dark passage.'

Again the Spaniard silently obeyed the old servant, and Penelope never saw the look, full of passionate humiliation and dumb craving for forgiveness, with which he uttered the words—though they brought vague relief—explaining that he was leaving his groom to drive her and her maid back to the hotel alone.

During the moments which followed, Mrs. Robinson, looking straight before her, spoke much of indifferent matters, and pointed out to Mrs. Mote many an interesting and characteristic sight by the roadside; but both the speaker's knee and the hands clasped across it trembled violently the while, and when they were at last safely back again in the hotel, after Mrs. Robinson had said some gracious words to Don José Moricada's English groom, and had given him

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more substantial tokens of her gratitude for the many pleasant drives she had taken with his noble master, a curious thing happened.

Having prepared the bath which had been her mistress's first order when they found themselves in their own rooms, Motey, now quite her stolid self again, on opening the sitting-room door, found her mistress engaged in a strange occupation. Mrs. Robinson, still standing, was cutting the long grey silk cloak, which she had been wearing but a moment before, into a thousand narrow strips. The maid's work-basket, a survival of Penelope's childhood—for it had been the little girl's first birthday-gift to her nurse—had evidently provided the sharp cutting-out scissors for the sacrifice.

To a woman who has done much needlework there is something dreadful, unnatural, in the wanton destruction of a faithful garment, and Mrs. Mote stood looking on, silent indeed, but breathing protest in every line of her short figure. But Penelope, after a short glance, had at once averted her eyes, and completed her task with what seemed to the other a dreadful thoroughness.

Then the relentless scissors attacked the charming hat. Each long white plume was quickly reduced to a heap of feathery atoms, and the exquisitely plaited straw was slashed through and through. 'You can give all the other things I have worn to-day to the chambermaid,' Mrs. Robinson said quickly, 'and Motey—never, never speak of—of—our stay here, in Madrid I mean, to me again. We shall leave to-night, not to-morrow morning.'

And now, looking down below, seeing the moving figures pacing slowly all together, then watching two of the shadowy forms detach themselves from the rest, and wander off into the pine-wood, then back again, down the steps which led to the lower moonlit terraces

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and so to the darker sea-shore, Mrs. Mote felt full of vague fears and suspicions.

Again she felt as if she were standing behind a door, barred away from her mistress. But, alas! this time it was Penelope who had turned the key in the lock, Penelope pursuing rather than pursued, and longing for the moment of surrender.

CHAPTER VII

' L'Amour est comme la dévotion: il vient tard. On n'est guère amoureuse ni devote à vingt ans . . . les prédestinées elles-mêmes luttent longtemps contre cette grace d'aimer, plus terrible que la foudre qui tomba sur le chemin de Damas.'

ANATOLE FRANCE.

. . . ' a Shepherdess, and fair was she.
He found she dwelt in Stratford, E.,
Which ain't exactly Arcadée.'

I

THE radiant stillness of early summer morning lay over the gardens of Monk's Eype; and though the wide stone-flagged terrace was in shadow, the newly-risen sun rioted gloriously beyond, flecking with pink and silver the sheets of sand which spread their glistening spaces from the shore to the sea.

Cecily Wake, already up and dressed, sitting writing by her open window, felt exquisitely content. The pungent scent thrown out by the geranium bushes which rose from the curiously twisted vases set at intervals along the marble balustrade floated up to where she sat, giving a delicate keenness to the warm sea-wind. She longed to go out of doors and make her way down to the little strip of beach which she knew lay below the terraces and gardens; but the plain gold watch which had been her father's, and a treasured possession of her own since she had left

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the convent school, told her that it was only a quarter to six.

Alone the birds, the butterflies, and herself seemed to be awake, in this enchanting and enchanted place, and she put the longing from her. Now and again, as she looked up from the two account-books lying open before her on the old-fashioned, rather rickety little table set at right angles to the window, and saw before and below her the splendid views of land and sea, came joyous anticipations of pleasant days to be spent in the company of Mrs. Robinson. To her fellow-guests—to Downing, to Wantley—she gave no thought at all. Winfrith alone was a possible rival. She sighed a little as she remembered that Penelope had seen him yesterday, and would doubtless see him to-morrow.

The girl was well aware—for only the vain and the obtuse are not always well aware of such things—that David Winfrith had no liking for her; more, that he regarded her affection for Mrs. Robinson as slightly absurd; worst of all, that he viewed with suspicion and disapproval her connection with the Melancthon Settlement and its affairs.

Some folk are born to charity—such was Cecily Wake; and some, in these modern days at any rate, have charity thrust upon them—such, in the matter of the Melancthon Settlement, was David Winfrith. Problems affected him far more than persons; and though the apparently insoluble problems of London poverty, London overcrowding, and London thriftlessness, had become to him matters full of poignant concern, he gave scarcely a thought to the individuals composing that mass of human beings whose claims upon society he recognized in theory. What thought he did give was extremely distasteful to him, perhaps because he regarded those who now provided these problems as irrevocably condemned and past present help.

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Winfrith had never cared to join in the actual daily effort made by the small group of educated, refined people, who were the precursors of the many now trying to grapple with a state of things which the thinkers of that time were just beginning to realize. Still, his hard good sense had been of the utmost use to the Settlement, or rather to Mrs. Robinson, during the years which immediately followed her husband's death.

But though he had been the terror, and the vigorous chaser-forth, of the sentimental faddist, he had at no time understood the value of that grain of divine folly without which it is difficult to regain those, themselves so foolish, that seem utterly lost.

Winfrith had been astonished, and none too well pleased, when he had found that certain of Cecily Wake's innovations, especially a day-nursery where mothers could leave their babies throughout their long working hours, had received the flattery of imitation from several of the new philanthropic centres then beginning to spring up in all the poorer quarters of the town. Cecily was full of the eager constructive ardour of youth, and during the two years spent by her at the Settlement her infectious energy had quickened into life more than one of the paper schemes evolved by Melancthon Robinson.

To the girl, in this early, instinctive stage of her life, problems were nothing, individuals everything. The Catholic Church enjoins the duty of personal charity, insisting upon its efficacy, both to those who give and to those who receive, as opposed to that often magnificent impersonal institutional philanthropy so much practised in this country. Thus, Cecily's instinct in this direction had never been checked, and the first sermon to which, as a child, she had listened with attention and understanding had been one in which a Jesuit had insisted on the duty of helping those who cannot, rather than those who can, help themselves.

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But even if Cecily Wake had never been taught the duty of charity, her nature and instinct would have always impelled her to lift up those who had fallen by the way, and to seek a cure for the apparently incurable. Then, as sometimes happens, the burdens which others had refused became, when she assumed them, surprisingly light; and often she felt abashed to find with what approval, and openly-expressed admiration, her two mentors at the Settlement, Philip Hammond and Mrs. Pomfret, regarded some action or scheme which had cost her nothing but a happy thought and a little hard work to carry through.

Cecily, an old-fashioned girl, was humble-minded, and far more easily cast down by a word of admonition concerning some youthful fault or want of method than lifted up by successes which sometimes seemed to those about her to be of the nature of miracles.

Even now, on this the first morning of her holiday, she was struggling painfully with the simple accounts of the day-nursery; for she had promised Mrs. Pomfret to make out a detailed statement of what its cost had actually been during the past month, and as she caught herself repeating 'Five and four make fifty-four,' she felt heartily ashamed of herself, knowing that Winfrith would indeed despise her if he knew how difficult she found this simple task!

II

There came a sudden sound below her window, the muffled tread of steps on the stone flags, and the tall, angular figure of Sir George Downing strode into view. He was bare-headed, but about his square, powerful shoulders hung the old-fashioned cloak which had attracted Wantley's attention the afternoon before. When he reached the marble parapet Cecily saw that he was carrying a large red despatch-box, which he

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placed, and then leant upon, across the flat, weather-stained top of the balustrade.

As she gazed at the motionless, almost stark figure, of which the head was now sunk between the shoulders, Cecily felt that he strangely disturbed her peaceful impression of the scene, and that, while in no sense attracted by, or even specially interested in him, she was curiously conscious of his silent, pervading presence.

She tried to remember what Lord Wantley had said to her the evening before concerning this same fellow-guest, for after the two men had joined their hostess on the terrace, Mrs. Robinson and Downing, leaving the younger couple, had wandered off into the pine-wood which formed a scented rampart between Monk's Eype, its terraces and gardens, and the open down.

At once Wantley had spoken to his companion of the famous man, and of his life-history, which he seemed to think must be familiar to Cecily as it was to himself. 'If you are as romantic as all nice young ladies should be, and as, I believe, they are,' he had said, 'you must feel grateful to Mrs. Robinson for giving you the opportunity of meeting such a remarkable man. Even I, *blasé* as I am, felt a thrill to-day when I realized that Persian Downing was actually here.' There had been a twinkle in his eye as he spoke, but even so his listener had felt that he meant what he said.

Like most young people, Cecily dreaded above all things being made to look foolish, and so, not knowing what to answer—for she knew but little of Persia and nothing at all of Sir George Downing—she had wisely remained silent. But now she reddened as she remembered how ignorant and how awkward she must have seemed to her dear Penelope's cousin, and she made up her mind that she would this very day ask Mrs. Robinson why Sir George Downing was famous,

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and why Lord Wantley considered him specially interesting to the romantic.

Almost at once came the opportunity. There was a light tap at the door, and as it opened Cecily saw Penelope, a finger to her lips, standing in the wide corridor, of which the citron-coloured walls were hung with large, sharply-defined black-and-white engravings of Italian scenery and Roman temples.

For a moment they stood smiling at one another; then Mrs. Robinson beckoned to the girl to come to her. 'I thought it just possible you might already be up,' she whispered, 'and that you would like to come down to the shore. Last night I promised Sir George Downing to take him early to the Beach Room, which I have had arranged in order that he may be able to work there undisturbed.' Then, as together they walked down the corridor, she added: 'I am afraid he has been already waiting some time, for I found it so difficult to dress myself—without Motey, I mean!' and, with a graver note in her voice, 'It's rather terrible,' she said, 'to think how dependent one may become on another human being. Poor old Motey! from her point of view I could not possibly exist without her. When I was abroad—last spring, I mean—I often got up quite early to paint, but Motey always managed to be earlier—I never could escape her! However, to-day I've succeeded, and you, child, are a quite as efficient, and a much pleasanter chaperon.'

Cecily did not stop to wonder what Mrs. Robinson could mean by these last words, uttered with strange whispering haste. She had at once noticed, as people generally do notice any change in a loved or admired presence, that her friend this morning looked unlike herself; but a moment's thought had shown that this was owing to the way in which Penelope had dressed her hair. The red-brown masses, instead of being

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cunningly coiled above and round the face, had been thrust into a gold net, thus altering in appearance the very shape of their owner's head, of her slender neck, and even, or so it seemed to her companion, of the delicate, cameo-like features. Cecily was not sure whether she approved of the change, and Mrs. Robinson caught the look of doubt in the girl's ingenuous eyes.

'Yes, I know I failed with my hair! In that one matter Motey will be able to exult; but, fortunately, I remembered that I had a net. My father had it made in Italy for mamma, and all through my childhood she always wore it, I envying her the possession. One day when I was ill (you know I was far too cosseted and pampered as a child) I said to her: "I'm sure I should get well quicker if you would only lend me your gold net!"—for I was a selfish, covetous little creature—and, of course, she did give it me. But poor mamma never got back her net. After I was tired of wearing it, or trying to wear it, I made a breastplate of it for my favourite doll. I kept it more than twice seven years, and now you see I've found a use for it!'

They were already halfway down the staircase which connected the upper story of Monk's Eype with the hall, when came the earnest question: 'Penelope, I want to ask you—now—before we go out, why Sir George Downing is famous, and what he has done to make him so?'

For a moment Mrs. Robinson made no answer. Then Cecily, her feet already on the rug laid below the lowest marble stair, felt a firm hand on her shoulder. Surprised, she turned and looked up. Penelope stood two or three steps higher, and though the younger woman in time forgot the actual words, she always remembered their gist, and the rapt, glowing look, the deliberation, with which they had been uttered.

'I am glad you have asked me this. I meant—I

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wanted—to speak to you of him yesterday, before you met him. For, Cecily'—the speaker's hand leaned heavily on the girl's slight shoulder, and her next words, though not uttered loudly, rang out as a confession of faith,—‘ if my acquaintance with Sir George Downing has been short, and I admit that it has been so, measured by time, his friendship and—and—his regard have become very much to me. I reverence the greatness of his mind, of his heart, and of his aims. Some day you will be proud to remember that you once met him.’

A little colour suffused the speaker's face, seeming to intensify the blue of her clear, unquailing eyes, to make memorable the words she had said.

More indifferently she presently added: ‘ As to why he has lately become what you call famous, ask the reason of my cousin, Lord Wantley. He will give what is, I suppose, the true explanation—namely, that Sir George Downing has of late years revealed himself as a brilliant diplomatist, as well as a remarkable writer, able to describe, as no one else has been able to do, the strange country which has become his place of work and dwelling. Other circumstances have also led, almost by accident, to his name becoming known, and his life in Persia discussed, by the sort of people whose approval and interest confer fame.’

In silence they walked together across the hall to the glass door, through which could be seen, darkly outlined against the line of sea, the angular, bent figure of the man of whom they had been speaking.

And then Mrs. Robinson again opened her lips; again the clear voice vibrated with intense, unaccustomed feeling: ‘ I should like to say one more thing—Always remember that Sir George Downing has never sought recognition; and though it has come at last, it has come too late. Too late, I mean, to atone for a great injustice done to him as a young man

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—too late to be now of any real value to him, unless it helps him to achieve the objects he has in view.'

But though the words were uttered with a solemnity, a passion of protest, which made the voice falter, when speaker and listener joined Downing, it was Cecily whose hazel eyes were full of pity, Penelope whose radiant and now softened beauty made the man, tired and seared with life, whose cause she had been so gallantly defending, feel, as he turned to meet her, once more young and glad.

That sunny morning hour altered, and in a measure transformed and deepened, Cecily Wake's emotional nature. Then was she brought into contact, for the first time, with the rarefied atmosphere of a great, even if unsanctified passion, and that she was, and for some considerable time remained, ignorant of its presence and nearness made the effect on her mind and heart, if anything, more subtle and enduring.

To this convent-bred orphan girl Love was the light-some pagan deity, synonymous with Youth, whose arrows sometimes stung, perhaps even fastened into the wound, but who threw no shadow as he walked the earth, seeking the happy girls and boys who had leisure and opportunity—Cecily was very human, and sometimes found time to sigh that she had neither—to enjoy the pretty sport of love-making, with the logical outcome of ideal marriage.

Life just then would have been a very different matter had she realized that Cupid spent a considerable portion of his time in the neighbourhood of the Settlement, and not always with the happiest results. Of course, Cecily knew that even in Stratford East there were happy lovers, such, for instance, the girl for whom she destined Penelope's wedding-ring; but on the whole she was inclined to believe that Cupid reserved his attentions, or at any rate his swiftest arrows, for those young people who enjoy the double advantage of good birth and wealth. Even them she

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would have thought more likely to meet with Cupid in the country than in the town, just as the believer in fairyland finds it impossible to associate the Little People with the London pavement, however much he may hope to meet with them some day sporting in grassy glades or under the hedgerows.

And so, while the other two were well aware that Love walked with them, down the steep steps cut out of the soft blue lias rock, Cecily Wake was utterly unconscious of his nearness, and this although the unseen presence quickened her own sensibilities, and made her more ready to receive new and unsought emotions.

III

To Mrs. Robinson, looking up into Downing's face, full of fearful, exultant joy in his presence—she had not felt sure that he would really come to Monk's Eype—the Beach Room, as arranged by her for her great man, cried the truth aloud.

Very divergently does love act on different natures, sometimes, alas! bringing out all that is grotesque and absurd in a human being, happily more often evoking an intelligent tenderness which seeks to promote the material happiness of the beloved.

Penelope had spent happy hours preparing the place where Downing, while under her roof, was to do the work he had so much at heart, and nothing had been omitted from the Beach Room which could minister to his peculiar ideals of comfort.

On the large table, where twenty odd years before the little Penelope Wantley and the dour-faced boy, David Winfrith, had set up their mimic fleets of wooden boats, were many objects denoting how special had been her care. Thus, in addition to the obvious requirements of a writer, stood a replica of the old-fashioned opaquely-shaded reading-lamp which she knew was always included in his travelling kit; close

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to the lamp were simple appliances for the making of coffee, for she was aware of Downing's almost morbid dislike to the presence, about him, of servants; and, behind a tall eighteenth-century screen, brought from China to Wyke Regis by some seafaring man a hundred years ago, was a camp-bed which would enable the worker, if so minded, to remain with his work all night.

Apart from these things, the large room had been left bare of ordinary furniture, but across the uneven oak boards, never wholly free from cobweb-like sheets of glittering grey sand, were strips of carpet, for Penelope had remembered Downing's once telling her that he generally came and went barefooted in that mysterious Persian dwelling—part fortress, part palace—to which her thoughts now so often turned with a strange mingling of dread and longing.

The man for whom all these preparations had been made, after passing through the heavy wooden door which shut out wind, sand, and spray, paused a moment and looked about him abstractedly.

Downing had always been curiously sensitive to the spirit and influence of place, and the oddly-shaped bare room, partly excavated from the cliff, into which for the moment no sun penetrated, struck him with sudden chill and gloom. Mrs. Robinson, intently watching him, aware of every flicker of feeling sweeping over the lean, strongly-accentuated features, saw the momentary hesitation, the darkening of his face, and there came over her, also, a feeling of sharp misgiving, a fear that all was not well with him.

Since they had first looked into one another's eyes, Penelope had never felt Downing to be so remote from herself as during the brief hours they had spent together the evening before; and now he still seemed to be mentally withdrawn, communing apart in a place whither she could not follow him.

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Standing there in the Beach Room, she asked herself whether, after all, she had not been wrong to compel him to come to Monk's Eype, imprudent to subject him, and herself, to such an ordeal. Yet, at the time she had first proposed his coming, she had actually made herself believe that in this way would be softened the blow she knew herself about to inflict on those who loved her, and those whose respect she was eager to retain. 'I want my mother to meet you,' she had said, in answer to a word of hesitation, even, as she now saw looking back, of repugnance, on Downing's part, 'for then, later, she will understand, even if she does not approve, what I am about to do.'

And so at her bidding he had come; and now, this morning, they both knew, and felt ashamed to know, how completely successful they had been in concealing the truth from those about them.

That first night, when out of earshot of Lord Wantley and Cecily Wake, Downing's words, uttered when they had found themselves alone for the first time for many days, had been: 'I feel like a thief—nay, like a murderer—here!' And yet, as she had eagerly reminded herself, he had stolen nothing as yet—that is to say, nothing tangible—only her heart—the heart which had proved so enigmatical a Will-o'-the-wisp to many a seeker.

And now, returning up the steep steps, going up slowly, as if she were bearing a burden, with Cecily silent by her side, respecting her mood, Mrs. Robinson blamed herself, with something like anguish, for not having been content to let Downing stay on in London. When there he had written to her twice, sometimes three times, a day, letters which seemed to bring him much nearer to herself than she felt him to be now, for they had been of ardent prevision of a time when they would be always together, side by side, heart to heart, in that far-away country which had become to her full of mysterious glamour and delight.

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She stayed her steps, and, turning, looked at the sea with a long wavering look, as she remembered, and again with a feeling of shame, though she was glad to know that this could not be in any sense shared by Downing, that one reason she had urged for his coming had been the nearness to Monk's Eype of David Winfrith's home.

She had become aware that, by lingering with her so long in France while on his way to England, Downing had lost a chance of furthering his political and financial projects.

The former Government had consisted of men who, even if not friendly to himself, sympathized with his aims; but now, among the members of the incoming Liberal Ministry, Persian Downing was looked at with suspicion, and regarded as one who desired to embroil his country with the great European Power who is only dangerous, according to Liberal tradition, when aggressively aroused from her political torpor.

Winfrith alone among the new men was known to have other views. He had in a sense made his name by a book concerning Asian problems, and Mrs. Robinson, with feminine shrewdness, felt sure that he would not be able to resist the chance of meeting, in an informal way, the man who admittedly knew more of Persia and its rulers than any Englishman alive.

No woman, save, perhaps, she who only lives to make a sport of men, cares to be present as third at the meeting of a man who loves her and of the man whom she herself loves. And so Penelope had arranged in her own mind that her cousin, Lord Wantley, should be the link between Winfrith and Downing.

She had, however, meant to prepare the way, and it was with that object in view that she had asked Winfrith to ride with her the day before. But to her

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surprise, almost to her indignation and self-contempt, she had found that the name of Sir George Downing, from her to her old friend, had literally stuck in her throat, and she had been relieved when she found that Winfrith was to be for some days absent from the neighbourhood.

When she and Cecily were once more standing on the broad terrace spread out before the villa, Mrs. Robinson broke her long silence. Resolutely she put from her the painful thoughts and the perplexities which had possessed her, and 'It must be very nice,' she said, 'to be a good girl. I was always a very naughty girl; but I am good now, and I want to beg your pardon for having been so very horrid to you yesterday—I mean about the ring.'

'Be horrid to me again,' said Cecily, 'but never beg my pardon; I don't like to hear you do it. Besides,' she added quaintly, 'you can never be really horrid to me, for I shall not let you be.'

'You are a comfortable friend, child, if even rather absurd at times. But now about this morning. I have arranged for Ludovic to drive you and Miss Theresa over to the monastery. We won't mention the plan to mamma, because she thinks Beacon Abbas the abiding-place of seven devils.'

'I'm afraid Aunt Theresa won't be well enough to get up to-day; but, of course, I can go to church by myself.'

'In that case, you and Ludovic can walk across the cliffs. It will be a good opportunity for you to describe to him the delights of the Settlement, and perhaps to make him feel a little ashamed of having done so little to help us.'

They were now close to the open windows of the dining-room, and Cecily could see the stately figure of Lady Wantley bending over a small table, on which lay, open, a large Bible.

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IV

An hour later an oddly-assorted couple set out for Beacon Abbas, bound for the monastery which had been so great an eyesore to the famous Evangelical peer.

Wantley's critical taste soon found secret fault with the blue-and-white check cotton gown, which, if it intensified the wearer's pure colouring, was surely unsuited to do battle with sea-wind; the sailor-hat, however, was more what the young man, to himself, called *de circonstance*; but he groaned inwardly over the clumsy shape of the brown laced shoes which encased what he divined to be the pretty, slender feet of his companion, and he thoroughly disapproved of a shabby little black bag fastened to her belt.

It must be admitted that Cecily did not compare, outwardly at least, very favourably with the three girls who had formed part of the house-party he had left the day before, though even in them, as regarded their minds, however, not their appearance, Wantley had found plenty to cavil at.

Perhaps Cecily's critic would have been surprised and rather nettled, had he known that he also was undergoing a keen scrutiny, and one not altogether favourable, from the candid eyes which he had soon decided were the best feature in the girl's serious face.

Wantley's loosely-knit figure, of only medium height, clad in what even she realized were somewhat unconventional clothes for church-going; the short pointed beard (Cecily felt sure that only old gentlemen were entitled to wear beards); the grey eyes twinkling under light eyebrows; the nondescript light-brown hair brushed sleekly across the lined forehead—these did not compose a whole according well with her ideal of young manhood. But, after all, Penelope had declared her cousin to be quite clever enough

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to be of use to the Settlement. There, as Cecily knew well, even the most unpromising educated human material could almost always be made useful: already, in imagination, she saw Lord Wantley teaching an evening class of youths to draw, for surely Mrs. Robinson had said he was a good artist.

As they walked along the path through the pine-wood, the fresh, keen air, the sunlight falling slantwise through the pine-trees, softened the young man's mood. He felt inclined to bless the girl for her silence: impertinent appreciation of nature was one of the traits he found most odious in those of his young countrywomen with whom fate—and Penelope—had hitherto brought him in contact. Wantley far preferred the honest—but, oh, how rare!—girl Philistines who bluntly avowed themselves blind to the charms of sea, land, and sky.

Not that he felt inclined to include Cecily Wake among these. He had seen her face when a sudden bend of the path had revealed the long turning coast-line, and spread the wide seas below them; but she had uttered no exclamation, refrained from trite remark, and so the heart of this rather fantastic young man warmed to her.

'And now,' he said, holding open the wicket-gate which led from the wood to the open stretch of down—'and now that the moment has come to reveal our mutual aversions, I will begin by confessing that quite my pet aversion in life has long been your Settlement.' Then, as his companion only reddened by way of answer, he altered his tone, and added more seriously: 'I esteem all that I have ever heard of Melancthon Robinson. I never saw him, for I was in America both when the marriage and when his death took place, but I have no patience with sham playing at Christian Socialism. Of course, I know that the Melancthon Settlement was but a pioneer of better things, and that it has led the way to the

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establishment of several more practical undertakings.' (Here Cecily bit her lip.) 'But when I think of all that my uncle—I of course mean Penelope's father—accomplished in the way of really benefiting and bettering the condition of our working people, and that, I imagine, without ever even seeing the East End—when I consider how he would have regarded the Melancthon Settlement——'

He smiled a rather ugly smile, but still Cecily Wake made no answer. Nettled by her silence, he added suddenly: 'I will give you an instance of what I mean. You know my cousin Penelope?'

For the first time Wantley realized that the girl walking by his side had a peculiarly charming smile, and he altered, because of that smile, what he had meant to be a franker expression of feeling.

'Now, honestly, Miss Wake, can you imagine Penelope, even in intention, living an austere life among the London poor, and occasionally pulling them up by the roots to see if they were growing better under her earnest guidance? The fact that young Robinson thought it possible that she should ever do so added, to my mind, a touch of absurdity to what was, after all, a sad business.'

'And yet he and she did really live and work at the Settlement,' objected Cecily quietly, and he was rather disappointed that she showed so little vehemence in defence of her friend.

'That's true, tho' I believe Penelope was very often away during the four months the marriage lasted, it was a new experience, and we all enjoy—Penelope more than most of us, perhaps—new experiences and new emotions.'

'But our people'—the girl spoke as if she had not heard his last words, and Wantley was pleased with the low, rounded quality of her voice—'our people, those of them who are still there, for you know that they come and go in that part of London, have never

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forgotten that time: I mean when Penelope lived at the Settlement. Perhaps you think that poor people do not care about beautiful things; if so, you would be surprised to see how those to whom Mrs. Robinson gave drawings treasure them, how they ask after her, how eager they are to see her!'

'She doesn't often give them that pleasure.' The retort was too obvious. He delighted in being Devil's Advocate, and it amused him to see the colour at last come and go in cheeks still pale from too long acquaintance with London air.

But the time had come to call a truce. The little town of Wyke Regis lay below them, looking, even to the boats lying on the sea, like a medieval map, and, for some time before they reached the road leading to the monastery, they could see streams of people passing through the great doors, which, forming a true French *porte-cochère*, gave access first to monastic buildings built round three sides of a vast paved courtyard, and then to the spacious gardens and orchard, where jutted out the curious miniature basilica which had been the pride and pleasure of the Popish Lord Wantley.

To Cecily's surprise, perhaps a little to her disappointment, Wantley refused to accompany her into the chapel; instead, he remained outside in the sunshine, smoking one cigarette after another, and amusing himself by deciphering the brief inscriptions on the plain slabs of stone which, sunk into the grass under and among the apple-trees, marked the graves of two generations of French monks.

Meanwhile, Cecily Wake—for they had arrived some minutes late, and Wyke Regis was now full of summer visitors—knelt down at the back of the chapel, among the curiously miscellaneous crowd of men and women generally to be found gathered together just within the doors of a Catholic place of worship.

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After she had said her simple prayers, not omitting the three requests, one of which at least she trusted would be granted, according to the old belief that such a favour is extended to those who enter for the first time a duly consecrated church, Cecily, during the chanting of the Creed, allowed her eyes to wander sufficiently to enjoy the singular beauty and ornate splendour of the monastery chapel.

She soon saw which were the windows connected with Penelope's family. On the one was emblazoned the mailed figure of St. George crushing the dragon, presumably of Wantley, under his spurred heel. Obviously of the same period was the St. Cecilia, who, sitting at an old-fashioned Italian spinet, seemed to be charming the ears of two musically-minded angels. More crude in colouring, and more utilitarian in design, was the figure of good St. Louis dispensing justice under the traditional rood: this last window, as the girl was aware, was that which the young man, who had refused to come into the chapel, had raised to the memory of his own father.

Just as the bell rang, warning those not in sight of the high-altar that the most solemn portion of the Mass was about to begin, there arose, close to where Cecily was kneeling with her face buried in her hands, the loud, discordant cry of an ailing child.

Various pious persons at once turned and threw shocked glances at a woman who, alone seated among the kneeling throng, and herself nodding with fatigue, was shifting from one arm to another a fat curly-headed little boy, whom Cecily, now well versed in such lore, instinctively guessed to be about two years old.

A few minutes later, Wantley, tired of waiting in the deserted orchard, pushed open the red-baize door.

At first he saw nothing; then, when his eyes had grown accustomed to the dimmer light, he became

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aware that at the end of a little lane of people, and outlined against a rose-coloured marble pillar, stood the blue-clad figure of a young woman holding to her breast a little child, the two thus forming the immemorial group which has kept its hold on the imagination of Christendom throughout the ages.

Cecily was swaying rhythmically, now forward, now backward, her head bent over that of the child. She did not see Wantley, being wholly absorbed in her task of quieting and comforting the little creature now cradled in her arms; but he, as he looked at her, felt as if he then saw her for the first time.

Over the whole scene brooded a curious stillness, the stillness with which he was already familiar, owing to his haunting, when abroad, the long Sunday services held alike in the great cathedrals and the little village churches of France and Italy.

Long years afterwards, Wantley, happening to be present at one of those futile conversations in which are discussed the first meetings of those destined to know each other well, in answer to the somewhat impertinent question, uttered, however, by a youthful and therefore privileged voice, 'And do you, Lord Wantley, remember your first meeting with her?' answered in all good faith: 'I first saw her in our Roman Catholic chapel at Beacon Abbas, nursing a little beggar child. She wore a bright blue frock, and what I took to be a halo; as a matter of fact it was a sailor-hat!' And then, from more than one of those that were present, came the words, 'How nice! and how exactly what one would have expected from what one knows of her now!' And Wantley, happy Wantley, saw no cause to say them nay.

Yet the half-hour which followed might well have effaced the memory of a more tangible vision, and have impressed a man less whimsical and easy-going as almost intolerably prosaic.

After the congregation had dispersed, he had had to

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wait at a short distance, but not, as he congratulated himself, out of earshot, while Cecily Wake and the Irish mother of the ailing child held what seemed to be an interminable conversation. The listener then became acquainted, for the first time, with certain not uninteresting data as to how the citizens of our great Empire are prepared for their struggle through existence. He learnt that the child's first meal that Sunday, administered by the advice of 'a very knowing woman,' had consisted of a half-glass of the best bitters and of a biscuit; he overheard Cecily's realistic if gently worded description of what effect this diet was likely to have on an unfortunate baby's interior, and he admired the way in which the speaker mingled practical advice with praise of the poor little creature's prettiness.

Finally, from the shabby waist bag Wantley had looked at with so much disfavour a couple of hours before, Cecily took a leaflet, which she handed to the woman, the gift being softened by the addition of a two-shilling piece. He heard her say, 'This is milk money; you will not spend it on anything else, will you?' And there had followed a few mysterious sentences, uttered in lower tones, of which Wantley had caught the words, 'afternoon,' 'Benediction,' 'fits,' and 'doctor.'

At last the woman had shuffled away with her now quiescent burden, and as they passed through the monastery gates Wantley saw with concern that his companion looked pale and tired. 'If you propose coming back here this afternoon, and seeing that woman again,' he said with kindly authority, 'I will drive you over. Perhaps by that time your aunt will be well enough to come too.'

'Oh, I hope not!' Cecily's expression of dismay was involuntary. 'Aunt Theresa only likes my helping poor people whom I know about already,' she explained.

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‘And does she approve of the Settlement?’ He could not forbear the question. The girl blushed and shook her head, smiling. ‘Of course not. She feels about the Settlement much as you do, only she thinks all that sort of work ought to be left to nuns. But Mrs. Robinson persuaded the Mother Superior of the convent where I was brought up, to write and tell Aunt Theresa that she might at least let me try and see if I could do what Penelope proposed.’

‘I think that Penelope has had decidedly the best of the bargain,’ Wantley rejoined dryly; for now, looking at his companion with new eyes of solicitude, he saw the effects of that work which he also thought might well be left to nuns, or at any rate to women older than Cecily. But he was somewhat taken aback when, encouraged by the kindly glance, his young companion exclaimed impulsively, ‘Why are you—what makes you—so unfair to Penelope? And why have you always refused to have anything to do with the Settlement?’

Wantley turned and looked at her rather grimly. ‘So ho!’ he said to himself, ‘my shortcomings have evidently been revealed. That’s too bad!’ And then, aloud, he answered, quite gravely, ‘If I am unfair to my cousin—I mean, of course, unduly so—she is suffering for the sins of her parents, or perhaps I should say of her father, by whom, as you are possibly aware, I was adopted in a sort of fashion after the death of my mother.’

Cecily looked at him surprised. To her apprehension, the great Lord Wantley had been one of those men who, in another and a holier age, might well have been canonized. Of Lady Wantley she knew, or thought she knew, less—indeed, they had never met till the evening before; but, while admitting to herself her own complete lack of comprehension of the older woman’s peculiar religious views, Cecily was prepared to idealize her in the double character of the

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famous philanthropist's widow and as Penelope's mother.

But Wantley, his easy-going nature now singularly moved and stirred, was determined not to spare her.

In short, dry sentences he told her of his happy childhood, of his father's conversion to the Catholic faith, followed shortly after by that now ruined father's death. Of Lord Wantley's reluctant adoption of him, coupled with a refusal to give him the education he had himself received, and which is, in a sense, the birthright of certain Englishmen.

He described, shortly indeed, but with a sharpness born of long-endured bitterness, the years which he had spent as an idle member of Lord and Lady Wantley's large household. Instinct warned him to pass lightly over Penelope's share in his early troubles and humiliations; but there were things in his recital which recalled, as almost every moving story generally does recall, episodes in the listener's own life; and when at last he looked at her, partly ashamed of his burst of confidence, he saw that he had been successful in presenting his side of the story, more, that Cecily was looking at him with new-born sympathy and interest.

Then a slight accident turned the current of their thoughts into a brighter and a lighter channel. Wantley suddenly dropped the heavy old Prayer-Book of which he had taken charge, and, as it fell on to the path, what seemed a page detached itself, and, fluttering out, was caught between the tiny twigs of a briar-bush. As he bent to rescue and restore, he could not help seeing that what was lying face upwards on the mass of little leaves was one of the 'Holy Pictures' so often placed by Catholics as markers in their books of devotion.

On the upper half of the small white card had been pasted an inch-square engraving of a little child guided by its guardian angel, while underneath was

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rudely written, in a childish handwriting, each word so formed as to resemble printing: 'Dear Angel, help me to-day to practise Obedience, Punctuality, and Kindness, for the love of the Holy Child and His blessed Mother.'

As Wantley placed the little card back again between the leaves of Cecily's shabby Prayer-Book, of which the title, 'The Path to Heaven,' pleased him by its unquestioning directness, he said, smiling, 'And may I ask if you still believe, Miss Wake, in the actual constant presence, near to you, of a guardian angel?'

'Of course I do!' She looked at him with wide-open eyes of surprise.

'But,' he said deferentially, 'isn't that a little awkward sometimes, even for you?'

Cecily made what was for her a great mental leap.

'Isn't everything—of that sort—a little awkward, sometimes, for all of us?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said; 'there must be times when guardian angels must feel inclined to edge off somewhat, eh? or do you think they fly off for rest and change when their charges annoy them by being contrary?'

Cecily looked at him doubtfully. He spoke quite seriously, but she thought it just possible that he was laughing at her. 'I suppose that they do not remain long with very wicked people,' she said at last, and he saw a frown of perplexity pucker her white forehead. 'But I'm sure they do all they can to keep us good.'

'I wonder,' he said reflectively, 'what limitation you would put to their power? To give you an instance; you admit that had your aunt been at church to-day you could not have taken charge of that poor baby, or afterwards helped, as you most certainly did help, its tired mother. Now, do you suppose that this baby's guardian angel provoked, by some way best known to itself, your excellent aunt's headache?'

'Laugh at me,' she said, smiling a little vexedly,

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*but not at our own or at other people's guardian angels; for I suppose even you would admit that if they are with us they have feelings which may be hurt?'

As he held the wicket-gate open for her to pass through from the cliff path into the pine-wood boundary of Monk's Eype, Wantley said suddenly: 'I wonder if you have ever read a story called "In the Wrong Paradise"? ' and as Cecily shook her head he added: 'Then never do so! I am sure your guardian angel would not at all approve of the moral it sets out to convey.' And then, just as she was going up from the flagged terrace into the central hall of the villa, he said, the laughter dying wholly out of his voice: 'And if I may do so, let me tell you that I hope, with all my heart, that I may ultimately be found worthy to enter whichever may happen to be *your* Paradise.'

A look of great kindness, of understanding more than he had perhaps meant to convey, came over Cecily's candid eyes. She made no answer, but as she ran upstairs to her aunt's room she said to herself: 'Poor fellow! Of course he means the Church. Oh, I must pray hard that he may some day find his way to his father's Paradise and mine!'

She found her aunt lying down, and apparently asleep, on the broad comfortable old sofa which was placed across the bottom of the bed, opposite the window. The pretty room, hung with blue Irish linen forming an admirable background to Mrs. Robinson's fine water-colours, looked delightfully cool to the girl's tired eyes; the blinds had been pulled down, and Cecily, walking on tiptoe past her aunt, sat down in a low easy-chair, content to wait quietly till Miss Wake should open her eyes. But the long walk, the sea-air, had made the watcher drowsy, and soon Cecily also was asleep.

Then, within the next few moments, a strange thing happened to Cecily Wake.

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After what seemed a long time, she apparently awoke to a sight which struck her as odd rather than unexpected.

On the elder Miss Wake's chest, nestling down among the folds of her white shawl, sat a tiny angel, whose chubby countenance was quite familiar to Cecily, as his brown curls and pale, sensitive face recalled, though, of course, in a benignant and peaceful sense, the little child whom she had soothed in church.

Cecily tried to get up and go to her aunt's assistance but something seemed to hold her down in her chair. 'Please go away,' she heard herself say, quite politely, but with considerable urgency. 'How can my aunt's headache get better as long as you sit there? Besides, your little charge is much in need of you!'

But the angelic visitor made no response, and she noticed, with dismay, that he wore on his chubby little face the look of intelligent obstinacy so often seen on the faces of very young children.

Again she said: 'Please go away. You are really not wanted here'—as a concession she added, 'any more!' But he only flapped his little wings defiantly, and seemed to settle down among the warm folds of Miss Theresa's shawl as if arranging for a long stay.

Cecily was in despair; and she began to think that everything was strangely topsy-turvy. 'Perhaps,' she said to herself, 'he only understands Irish, so I'll try him with French!' and, speaking the language, to her so dear, which lends itself so singularly well to courteous entreaty, she again begged her aunt's strange guest to take his departure, pointing out that his mission was indeed fulfilled, and there were reasons, imperative reasons, why he should go away. Then, to her dismay, the little angel's eyes filled with tears, and at last he spoke impetuously: 'Mais oui, j'ai de quoi!' he cried angrily in an eager childish treble.

Cecily felt herself blush as she answered hurriedly,

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soothingly: ' Mais, petit ange, mon cher petit ange, je ne dis pas le contraire! ' and she had hardly time to add to herself, ' Then he *was* Irish, after all,' when the blinds, which were drawn down, all flapped together, although, as Cecily often assured herself afterwards, there was absolutely no wind, and the girl, rubbing her eyes, once more saw the white shawl as usual crossed over primly on her aunt's chest, while Miss Theresa Wake, opening her eyes, suddenly exclaimed: ' Is that you, my dear? I have not been asleep exactly, but I now feel much better and less oppressed than I did a few moments ago.'

Cecily never told her curious experience, but a day came when the dearest of all voices in the world asked imperiously: ' Mammy, do angels ever come and talk to people? I mean to usual people, not to saints and martyrs. Of course, I *know*, they do to *them*.' And Cecily answered, very soberly: ' I think they do sometimes, my Ludovic, for an angel once came and talked to me.' But not even to this questioner did she reveal what the angelic visitant had said to her.

CHAPTER VIII

L'amour est de toutes les passions la plus forte, parce qu'elle attaque à la fois la tête, le cœur et le corps.

I

ALL over the East, and even nearer home, on the Continent, old women take a great place, and are even permitted to play a great rôle, in the human affairs of those about them. Here in England it is otherwise. Here they are allowed but grudgingly the privilege of standing on the bank whence they see helpless boats, laden with freights to them so precious, drifting down a current of whose dangerous places, of whose shoals

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and shallows, their knowledge and experience are counted of no moment.

In a French country-house three such women—as Lady Wantley, Theresa Wake, and the old nurse, Mrs. Mote, would have been the pivots round which the younger people would have naturally revolved. At Monk's Eype their presence—and this although each was singularly individual in character and disposition—did not affect or modify one jot the actions of the men and women about them.

Mrs. Robinson, now weaving with unfaltering hand her own destiny, absorbed in her own complicated emotions of fear, love, and pain, would have listened incredulously indeed, had a seer, greatly daring, warned her that each of these three old women might well, were she not careful to respect their several prejudices, bring her to shipwreck.

Downing, whose business it had long been to study those about him with reference to their attitude to himself, instinctively, avoided the solitary company of Lady Wantley, for in her he recognized a possible and formidable opponent. But of old Miss Wake's presence in the villa he was scarcely conscious. Penelope's maid he knew to be a point of danger, the living spark which might set all ablaze.

The day after his coming to Monk's Eype, Sir George Downing and Mrs. Mote had met face to face, and he had turned on his heel without a word of greeting. Yet when he had last seen her they had parted pleasantly, the servant believing, foolishly enough, that she and her mistress were then seeing the last of one who had been their inseparable companion for many, to her increasingly anxious, days.

Mrs. Mote's crabbed face and short, ungainly figure were burnt into Downing's memory as having cast the only shadow on the sunny stretch of time which had so marvellously renewed his youth, brought warmth about his chilled heart, and made the future bright

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exceedingly. And so the meeting with the old nurse had been to him a sharp reminder that one person at least at Monk's Eype already wished him ill, and would fain see him go away for ever.

The maid also avoided him, though she sat long hours at her window, taking note of his comings and goings, jealously counting the moments that her mistress chose to spend in his company, either down in the Beach Room, or, more often, pacing up and down on the broad terrace, and under the ilex-trees which protected from relentless sea-winds the delicate flowering shrubs that were counted among the greatest glories of Monk's Eype.

It was there, under those trees, completely screened from the windows which swept the terrace, that Mrs. Robinson preferred to spend what leisure Sir George Downing allowed himself from his work. More than once Motey had come down from her watching-place, and had crept into the little pine-wood to watch, to overhear, what was being done and what was being said in the ilex grove. But the old woman's unhappy, suspicious eyes only saw what they had seen so often before: her mistress and Downing walking slowly side by side, she listening, absorbed, to his utterances. Sometimes Penelope would lay her hand a moment on his arm, with a curious, familiar, tender gesture—curious as coming from one who avoided alike familiarity and tenderness when dealing with her friends.

Only once, however, had Mrs. Mote surprised a gesture which might not have been witnessed by all the world. One afternoon when a strand of Mrs. Robinson's beautiful hair had become loosened, and so uncoiled its length upon her shoulder, Downing, turning towards her, had suddenly taken it up between his fingers and raised it to his lips. Then the old nurse had seen the bright gleam of what was so intimately a part of her mistress mingling for a moment with the dark moustache heavily streaked

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with white, and she had clenched her hands in impotent anger and disgust.

II

Her aunt's presence at Monk's Eype scarcely affected Cecily Wake. The two had never become intimate; the girl's young eagernesses and enthusiasms disturbed Miss Wake, and even her sunny good temper and buoyancy were a source of irritation to one who had led so grey and toneless a life.

On the other hand, Miss Theresa Wake was really attached to the beautiful woman whom she called cousin.

She watched Penelope far more closely than the latter knew during those still, hot August days, when the thin, shrunken figure of the spinster lady, wrapped, in spite of the heat, in an old-fashioned cashmere shawl, sat back in one of the hooded chairs set on the eastern side of the terrace. When out in the open air Miss Wake always armed herself with one of the novels which had been thoughtfully provided by her kind hostess for her entertainment; but often she would lay the volume down on her knee, and gaze, her dim eyes full of speculation, at Mrs. Robinson's brilliant figure coming and going across the terrace, to and from the studio, sometimes—nay, generally—accompanied, shadow-wise, by the tall, lean form of Sir George Downing.

After watching these two for a while, Miss Wake would find her interrupted novel oddly uninteresting and dreary.

To Cecily these holiday days were not passing by as happily as she had thought they would. She felt for the first time in her short life disturbed, she knew not why; distressed, she knew not by what.

The hours spent with Mrs. Robinson, doing work she had looked forward to doing, seemed strangely

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dull compared with those briefer moments when Wantley strolled or sat by her side, looking down smiling into her eyes, asking whimsical questions concerning the Settlement, with a view—or so he said—of settling there himself, if Mr. Hammond and Mrs. Pomfret would accept him as a disciple!

Twice in those ten days he had gone with her to early Mass at Beacon Abbas; and oh, how pleasant had been the walks along the cliff path, how soothing the half-hours spent in the beautiful chapel, with Wantley standing and kneeling by her side. But on the second occasion of their return from Beacon Abbas Penelope had greeted the two walkers, or rather had greeted Cecily, with a questioning piercing look. Was it one of dissatisfaction, of slight jealousy, or simply of surprise? That one glance—and Wantley was well aware that it was so—put an end to any further joint expeditions to the monastery chapel.

During these same unquiet days, when Cecily's heart would beat without reason, when she seemed to be always waiting, she knew not for what, the girl became fond, in a shy, childish way, of Penelope's mother.

Perhaps because she was utterly unlike any other woman Cecily Wake had ever seen, or even imagined, Lady Wantley exercised a curious fascination over her heart and mind. The tall, stately figure, wrapped in sweeping black and white garments, was seen but seldom in the sunshine, out of doors. Since her widowhood she had lived a life withdrawn from the world about her, and she had occupied what had been a sudden and unwelcome leisure by writing two mystical volumes, which had enjoyed great popularity among those ever ready to welcome a new interpretation of the more esoteric passages of the Scriptures.

When staying at Monk's Eype, Lady Wantley would spend long hours of solitude in the Picture Room; and there Cecily would sometimes find her,

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absorbed in a strangely-worded French or English book of devotion, from which, looking up, she would make the girl read her short passages. At other moments Cecily would discover her engaged in writing long letters of spiritual advice to correspondents, almost always unknown to her, who had read her books, and who wished to consult her concerning their own spiritual difficulties and perplexities.

When not thus employed Lady Wantley sat idle, her long, delicately-modelled hands clasped loosely together, enjoying, as she believed, actual communion with her own dead—with the fine, true-hearted father, whose earthly memory was so dear to her; with the beloved mother, to whom as she grew older she felt herself to be growing more alike and nearer; with the husband who, however stern and awe-inspiring to others, had ever been fond and tender to herself. The little group of strangely assorted souls seemed ever gathered about her, and in no distant, inaccessible heaven.

Once, when Cecily Wake had come upon her in one of these strange companioned trances, Lady Wantley had said very simply: 'I have been telling Penelope's father of her many perfections: of her goodness to those who, if they are the disinherited of the earth, are yet the heirs of the kingdom—those whom he himself ever made his special care. I think, dear child, that, if you would not mind my doing so, I will also some day tell him—my husband, I mean—of you, and of Penelope's love and care for you.' And she had added, as if to herself: 'But how could she be otherwise? Was she not, even before her birth, dedicated to the Lord in His temple?'

Lady Wantley was sometimes in a sterner mood, when hell seemed as near as—ay, nearer than—heaven. Evil spirits then appeared to encompass her, and she would feel herself to be wrestling with their dread master himself. When this was so, her delicate,

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bloodless face would become transfigured, and the large, heavy-lidded grey eyes would seem to flash out fire, while Cecily listened, awed, to strange majestic utterances, of which she knew not that their source was the Apocalypse.

That this convent-bred girl had a genuine belief in the Evil One, and a due fear of his cunning ways, was undoubtedly a link between Lady Wantley and herself; as was also the softer fact of her great affection for the one creature whom Lady Wantley loved with simple human devotion. After hearing the older woman talk, as she so often did talk, of her loved and admired daughter, Cecily would feel grieved, even a little perplexed, when next she perceived how lightly Penelope esteemed this boundless mother-love.

In no material thing did Mrs. Robinson neglect Lady Wantley. Every morning she would make her way into the Picture Room, ready with some practical suggestion designed to further her mother's comfort during the coming day; but to Penelope, much as she loved her, Lady Wantley never alluded to the matters which lay nearest to her heart. She found it easier to do so to the Catholic girl than to the creature she had herself borne, over whose upbringing she had watched so zealously, and, as she sometimes admitted to herself in moments of rare self-sincerity, with so little success.

III

Wantley only so far remembered the presence at Monk's Eype of Penelope's mother as to thank Heaven that she had nothing in common with the match-making dowagers, of whom he had met certain types in his way through life, and who at this moment would have brushed some of the bloom from his fragrant romance.

Absorbed as he had already become in the novel

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feeling of considering another more than himself, he yet found the time now and again to wonder why it was that he saw so little of the remarkable man to whom he stood in at least the nominal relation of host. That first evening they had sat up together long into the night, and there had been, not only no apparent barrier between them, but the younger man had been both fascinated and interested by the other's account of the land where he had already spent the best half of his life. Such had been the magic of Downing's manner, such the infectious quality of his sustained enthusiasm, that for a moment Wantley had wondered whether he also might not create a career for himself in that country of which the boundless resources and equally boundless necessities had now been made real to him for the first time.

Then, as it had seemed, gradually, but looking back he saw that the change had come very quickly, Wantley had perceived that Downing avoided instead of seeking or welcoming his company. True, the other man was engaged in heavy work, spending much of his time in the Beach Room, and often returning there late in the evening; but even so Wantley could not understand why Downing now seemed desirous of seeing as little of him as possible. The knowledge made him a little sore, the more so that he attributed the change in the other's manner to some careless word uttered by Penelope.

Another grievance, and one which pushed the other into the background of his mind, was the fact that Mrs. Robinson, more capricious, more restless than her wont, absorbed each day much of the time and attention of Cecily Wake. That the latter apparently regarded this constant call on her leisure as a privilege, in no sense softened the young man's irritation: it seemed to him that his cousin took an impish delight in frustrating his attempts—somewhat

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shamefaced at first, openly eager as time went on—to be with the girl.

Wantley consoled himself by bestowing on the aunt the time and the attention he would fain have bestowed on the niece. The elder Miss Wake soon came to regard him as an exceptionally agreeable and well-bred man, with a strong leaning to Catholicism—even, she sometimes ventured to hope, to the priesthood; for many were Lord Wantley's questions concerning monasteries and convents, and had he not on two week-day mornings escorted her niece to Mass at Beacon Abbas? According to Miss Wake's limited knowledge of the ways of men, and especially of the ways of noblemen, such zeal, if it involved early rising, was quite exceptional, and must surely be done with an object.

Poor Wantley, unconscious of these hopes, his sense of humour for the moment more or less suspended, found the mornings especially hang heavy on his hands, for Cecily, after an hour spent with Penelope in the studio, generally disappeared upstairs into her own room till lunch; and this absorption, as he supposed, in business connected with the Melancthon Settlement did not increase his liking for the place which filled so much of Cecily's heart, and took up so much of the time he might have spent with her.

At last the day came when the young man solved the innocent mystery of how Cecily Wake spent her mornings. Passing along the terrace, he overheard a fragmentary conversation which showed him that his cousin was using her young friend as secretary, handing over to her the large correspondence which dogs the hours of every man and woman known to have the disposal of great wealth. When there had been no one at hand more compliant, Wantley had himself undertaken the task of dealing with the hundred and one absurd, futile, often pathetic,

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requests for help, which filled by far the greater part of Mrs. Robinson's letter-bag. Too well he knew the tenor of the various remarks which now fell upon his ear; one sentence, however, at once compelled closer attention: 'I have had a letter—to which I should like you also to send an answer. It's from David Winfrith. Please say I'm glad he's back, and that we will drive over there to-morrow. Write to him and say I have asked you to do so, as I am too busy to answer his letter to-day.'

Wantley, with keen irritation, heard the low, hesitating answer: 'If you don't mind, I would so much prefer not to write to Mr. Winfrith. You know he has never liked me, and I am sure he would feel very much annoyed if he thought'—the soft voice paused, but went bravely on—'if he thought I had seen any letter of his to you——'

'But you have not seen his letter! Still, I dare say you're right. We will drive over there to-day—the more so that I have something else to do in that neighbourhood.'

A moment later Wantley heard the door of the studio opening and shutting, and knew that his cousin was alone. He walked in through the window prepared to tell Mrs. Robinson, and that very plainly, his opinion of what he considered her gross selfishness. But quickly she carried the war into the enemy's country.

'I saw you,' she said, with heightened colour, 'and I didn't think it very pretty of you to stand listening out there!'

Then, struck by the look of suppressed anger which was his only answer, she added: 'Perhaps I've been rather selfish the last few days, but you and she see quite as much of each other as is good for you, just at present. And, Ludovic, I've been longing to show you something which, I think even you will agree, exactly fits your present condition.'

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She took from the table a prettily bound volume, in which had been thrust an envelope as marker. 'Listen!' she cried, and then declaimed with emphasis, and partly in the faultless French which he had always envied her:

'*First Old Bachelor* : " Et les jeunes filles? Aime-tu ça? Toi? "

'*Second Old Bachelor* : " Hélas! mon ami, je commence! "

Wantley bit his lip. He could not help smiling. 'You have not shown her that?' he asked suspiciously.

'No, indeed! How could you think such a thing, even of me?' Mrs. Robinson rose; she came and stood by him, and as their eyes met he saw that she was strangely moved. 'Ah, Ludovic,' she said softly, 'you are a lucky man!'

He looked away. 'Do you really think that she likes being with me?' he asked awkwardly.

'Yes, even better than with me—now!' The young man knew, rather than saw, that her eyes were full of tears, and in spite of his absorption in himself and his own affairs, he found time to wonder why Penelope was so unlike herself—so gentle, so moved. Her next words confirmed his feeling of uneasy astonishment, for, 'You won't ever set her against me,' she asked, 'whatever happens, will you?'

Wantley felt amused and a little touched. 'My dear Penelope!' he cried, 'I think it's my turn now to ask you how you could think such a thing, even of me? Also I must say you do her a great injustice. Why, she loves you with all her heart! Not even—he used the first simile that came into his mind—'not even an angel with a flaming sword would keep her from you.'

'No; but some Roman Catholic notion of obedience to one's lawful owner might prove more tangible than a flaming sword!'

The harsh words grated on Wantley's ear; he

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wondered why women sometimes put things so much more coarsely than a man, in a similar case, would do.

But before he could answer Penelope had moved away, and, with a complete change of voice, and a return of her usual rather disdainful serenity of manner, was saying: 'I see Sir George Downing coming up from the Beach Room. By the way, I want to tell you that he finds he can't work properly with so many people about, and I have suggested that he should put in a few days at Kingpole Farm. I believe the lodgings there are very comfortable, and the place has the further advantage of being near Shagisham. You know he wishes to meet David Winfrith, and I thought, perhaps, that the introduction'—Penelope now spoke with nervous hesitation—'would come better from you.'

Wantley assented cordially, pleased that his cousin should for once propose a common-sense plan in which he, Wantley, would play a proper part.

Wantley, as Penelope shrewdly suspected—for to her he had never worn his heart upon his sleeve—had spent from boyhood onwards much more time than was good for his soul's health in self-pity and self-examination.

This was especially true during that portion of the year when he was in England, and especially the case when he was staying, as he did each summer, at Monk's Eype. In his heart he grudged his beautiful cousin the possession of a place created by a man to whom they stood in equal relationship, but which, as he never failed to remind himself when in Dorset, had always belonged to the Lord Wantley of the day. At Monk's Eype he felt himself a stranger where he ought to have felt at home; and this was the more painful to him because the villa had been the creation of the one man with whom he believed himself to be in closer affinity than with any other former bearer of his name.

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During his long idle youth, Wantley's happiest moments had been those spent in wandering along the byways of France, Spain, and Germany. He had been denied the ordinary upbringing of his rank and race, but, during the long Continental journeys in which he had been the companion of Lord and Lady Wantley and their daughter, he had learnt and seen much which in later life was to cause him abiding pleasure and comfort, the more so as he was a fair artist, and came of scholar stock.

Brought up by a mother to whom her son's future had been the only consoling thought in a middle age of singular trials and perplexities, Ludovic Wantley had from childhood realized, to an almost pathetic extent, the pleasant possibilities of life as a British peer. But very soon after he had succeeded his cousin he discovered that much of the glories, and all the pleasures attached to the position would be denied him, partly from want of means, more perhaps from lack of that robustness of outlook induced, not wholly to his spiritual advantage, in the average public school boy.

When abroad Wantley never became, as it were, forgetful of his identity—never affected the incognito so dear, and sometimes so useful, to the travelling English peer. Indeed, young Lord Wantley had soon become the Continental innkeeper's ideal 'milord,' content to pay well for indifferent accommodation, delighted rather than otherwise to meet with those trifling mishaps which annoy so acutely the ordinary tourist, and content to come back, winter after winter, to the same auberge, osteria, or gasthaus.

In yet another matter he differed greatly from the conventional travelled and travelling Englishman: he came and went alone, apparently feeling no need, as did most of his countrymen, of congenial companionship. One day the kindly landlady of one of those stately posting inns, yclept 'Le Tournebride,' which may still be found scattered through provincial

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France, had ventured to suggest that the next time she had the pleasure of seeing him she hoped he would come accompanied by 'une belle milady.' He had smiled as he had answered: 'Jamais! jamais! jamais!' But that particular 'Tournebride' had known him no more.

Wantley had thought much of marriage. What man so situated does not do so? He knew, or thought he knew, that to him money and marriage must be synonymous terms, and the knowledge had angered him. In one of his rare moments of confidence he had said to his cousin: 'Like your eccentric friend who always knew when there was a baronet in the room, I always know when there's an heiress there. And, what is more serious, her presence always induces a feeling of repulsion!'

Penelope had laughed suddenly, and then changed the subject. Any allusion to Wantley's monetary affairs held for her a sharp if small pin-prick of conscience. For a while she had tried, it must be admitted in but a fitful and desultory way, to bring him in contact with the type of English girl, often, let it be said in parenthesis, a not unpleasing type of modern girlhood, who is willing to consider very seriously, and in all good faith, the preliminaries to a bargain in which she and her fortune, a peer and his peerage, are to be the human goods weighed opposite one another in the balance of life.

There had also been periods in Wantley's life when he had found himself in love with love, and ready to weave an ardent romance round every pretty sentimentalist in search of an adventure. But these feelings had never deepened into one so strong as to compel the thought of an enduring tie. His fastidious critical temperament shrank from concrete realities, and as time went on he had felt, over-sensitively, how little he had to offer to a woman of the kind to whom he sometimes felt a strong if temporary attraction.

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As he grew older, passed the border-line of thirty, the longing for the stability afforded by a happy marriage appealed to him, for awhile, far more than it had done when he was a younger man. And so for some two years, being then much abroad, he had toyed with the idea of making, in France or in Italy, a *mariage de convenance* with some well-born, well-dowered girl who should leave her convent-school to become his wife, and with whom he would promise himself, when in the mood, an after-marriage romance not lacking in piquancy.

Unfortunately, Wantley was an Englishman, and by no means as unconventional as he liked to think himself. Accordingly, when he came to consider, and even more when he came to discuss, with some good-natured French or Italian acquaintance, the preliminaries of such a marriage as had appealed to his fancy, his gorge rose at certain sides of the question then closely presented to his notice, and finally he put the idea from him.

This spring Wantley had returned to England, ready, as usual, to spend the summer in half-unwilling attendance on his lovely cousin, and further than he had been for many years from all thought of marriage.

Then, with what seemed at times incredible and disconcerting swiftness, had come over him, in these few days of sunny quietude, a limitless unreasoning tenderness for a young creature utterly unlike his former ideals of womanhood. Even when aghast at the thought of how easily he might have missed her on the way of his life—even when he felt her already so much a part of himself that he could no longer have described her, as he had first seen her, to a stranger—Wantley admitted, nay, forced on himself the knowledge, that she was not beautiful, not even particularly gifted or clever. One reason why he had always displayed so sincere a lack of liking for the

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heiresses, willing to be peeresses, whom Penelope had thrust upon his notice, had been that to him they had all looked so unaccountably plain; and yet, compared with Cecily Wake, he knew that more than one of these young women might well have been considered a beauty.

Wantley had always been fond of analyzing his own emotions, and now the simplicity, as well as the strength, of his feeling amazed him. When with Cecily Wake he felt that he was journeying through some delicious unknown country, the old Paradise re-discovered by them two, she still a sweet mysterious stranger, whose better acquaintance he was making day by day. But when she was no longer by his side, and there were many hours he could only spend in thinking of her, then Wantley felt as a mother feels about her own little child, as if he had always known her, always loved her with this placid and yet uneasy care, this trusting and yet watchful tenderness.

He had ever deprecated enthusiasm, and had actively disliked philanthropists, as only those who in early youth are constrained to endure the company of enthusiasts and the atmosphere of philanthropy can deprecate the one and dislike the other. Well, now, so the young man whimsically told himself, had come what his old enemies—those who had gathered about his uncle and aunt in days he hated to remember—would doubtless have recognised as a distinct ‘call.’ It seemed to him that he had made a good beginning that first Sunday afternoon, when he had kept the aunt in play while the niece had accomplished her prosaic errand of mercy.

The same evening, late at night, he had gone into the room which had been the great Lord Wantley’s study, and, under the grim eyes of the man who had never judged him fairly, he had pulled out faded Blue-Books, reports, and pamphlets which had been the tools of a

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mighty worker for his kind. Then, lamp in hand, he had wandered on into the studio, and there, oddly out of keeping with their fellows on the pretty quaintly placed white shelves framing the door, he had found newer, more digestible, contributions to the problems to which he was now, half unwillingly, turning his mind.

He took down a slim, ill-printed volume, bearing on the title-page the name of Philip Hammond, and composed of essays which had first appeared in the more serious reviews. Setting down his lamp on Penelope's deal painting-table, he opened the little book with prejudice, read on with increasing attention, and finally placed it back on the shelf with respect.

Even so, his lips curled as he remembered the only time he had seen the writer. The two men had met by accident in Mrs. Robinson's London house, and Wantley had been amused by Hammond's obvious—too obvious—devotion to the beautiful widow of the man whose aims and whose ideals he had known how to describe so well in this very book. For the hundredth time Wantley asked himself in what consisted Penelope's power of attracting such men as had been apparently Melancthon Robinson, as was undoubtedly Philip Hammond, as had become—to give the clinching instance—David Winfrith.

The day before, when driving back to Monk's Eype from the place where he had been spending a few pleasant days, he had passed the two riders, and had seen them so deeply absorbed in one another's conversation that they had ridden by without seeing him.

For a moment, as he had driven by quickly in a dogcart belonging to his late host, and therefore unfamiliar to Penelope and her companion, he had caught a look—an unguarded, unmasked, passionate look—on Winfrith's strong, plain face.

What glance, what word on his companion's part, had brought it there? That Winfrith should allow

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himself to be thus moved angered Wantley. He set himself to recall very deliberately certain things that his mother, acting with strange lack of good feeling, had told him, when he was still a boy, concerning Lady Wantley's mother, Penelope's grandmother. He wondered if Penelope *knew*. On the whole he thought not. But in any case, who could doubt from whom she had had transmitted to her that uncanny power of bewitching men, of keeping them faithful to herself, while she remained, or at least so he felt persuaded, quite unaffected by the passions she delighted in unloosing?

In his own mind, and not for the first time, he judged his cousin very hardly. And yet, after that evening, Wantley never thought so really ill of her again, for, when he felt tempted to do so, he seemed to hear the words which he had heard said that day for the first, though by no means for the last, time: 'Why are you—what makes you—so unfair to Penelope?'

And even as he walked through the sleeping, silent house he reminded himself, repentantly, that his cousin's love-compelling power extended to what was already to him the best and purest, as it was so soon to be the dearest, thing on earth.

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CHAPTER IX

'La Passion, c'est l'ascétisme profane, aussi rude que ascétisme religieux.'—ANATOLE FRANCE.

I

WITHIN two hours of his curious conversation with his cousin, Wantley saw Mrs. Robinson and Cecily Wake start off, alone, for Shagisham.

With his hands in his pockets, his head slightly thrown back, standing in a characteristic attitude, the young man watched them drive away in the curious low dogcart which had been designed by Penelope for her own use. As he turned back into the hall an unaccountable depression seized on him. The memory of his cousin's words concerning Cecily was far from giving him pleasure. He felt as if in listening he had been treacherous, not so much to the girl as to their own ideal relation to one another.

It is surely a mistake to say, as is so often said, that uncertainty and doubt are the invariable accompaniments of the beginning of a great passion. Wantley had felt, almost from the first, as sure of her as he had felt of himself, and yet his reverence for Cecily was great, and his opinion of his own merits most modest.

Death might come, and now he had become strangely afraid of death, but Cecily, living, he knew would and must belong to him. He was so sure of this, and he loved her so well as she was, that he had no desire, as yet, to do that which would let all the world share his dear mysterious secret, become witness of his deep content. And so, though Penelope had been very gentle—indeed, save at one moment, very delicate in what she had implied rather than said — Wantley

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would have been better pleased had the words remained unuttered.

Then his mind went on to wonder why his cousin had seemed so distressed and so unlike her restrained and, with him, always wholly possessed self. What had signified her odd words, her pleading look, so full of unwonted humility? Things were not going well with Wantley to-day, and his vague discontent was suddenly increased by the recollection that George Downing was leaving Monk's Eype.

Since Downing's arrival Wantley had not once been down to the Beach Room. Mrs. Robinson knew how to insure that her wishes, whatever they might be, should be known and respected, and so, partly in obedience to a word said by her regarding her famous guest's dislike of interruption, partly because he had felt Downing's manner become more and more frigid during the brief moments when the two men were obliged to place themselves in the courteous juxtaposition of host and guest, the younger had studiously avoided forcing his company on the elder.

Now, remembering Penelope's words concerning the part he was to play in the matter of introducing Downing to David Winfrith, he felt that he might without indiscretion seek the other out.

Wantley was surprised by the warmth of his welcome. Downing seemed really glad to have his solitude invaded, and a moment later his visitor, sitting with his back to the broad window, at right angles to the older man's powerful figure, was realizing with some amusement and astonishment how carefully Penelope's old play-room had been arranged with a view to its present occupant's convenience and even comfort.

His cool, observant eyes first took note of the camp-bed, only partly hidden by the splendid Chinese screen, never before moved from its place in the great Picture Room of the villa; then of the strips of felt

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laid down over the oak floor; of the comfortable chair in which Downing was now leaning back—lastly, his glance rested on the wide writing-table, covered with papers, note-books, and a map held flatly to the wind-swept surface of the table by a small revolver.

Wantley also perceived a pile of rugs, generally kept in the hall of the villa, for which he had searched in vain a day or two before, when he wanted something to wrap about the knees of old Miss Wake. This, then, was where they had been spirited away!

He charitably reminded himself that Persian Downing, in spite of his straight, long figure, his keen eyes, his powerful chin and jaw, was no longer a young man, and with much living alone had doubtless found time to acquire the art of securing for himself the utmost physical comfort. Wantley's admiration for him somewhat unreasonably declined in consequence, and no suspicion that these little arrangements, these little luxuries, might be the sole fruit of another person's intelligent thoughtfulness even crossed his mind.

They were both smoking—Downing an old-fashioned pipe, and his visitor one of the small French cigarettes of which he always carried a store about with him, and which had been the most tangible sign of his release from thralldom, the great Lord Wantley's horror and contempt of smoking and of smokers having been only equalled by his abhorrence of drinking and of drunkards.

The early afternoon light, reflected from the sea and sand outside, flooded the curious cavernous room with radiance, throwing the upper half of Downing's broad, lean figure in high relief. Wantley, himself in shadow, looked at him with renewed interest and curiosity, and as he did so he realized that there must have been a time when the man before him would have been judged singularly handsome. Now the

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large features were thin to attenuation—the brown skin roughened by much exposure to heat and dust; the grey eyes, gleaming under the bushy eyebrows, sunken and tired; while the thick moustache, streaked with white, hid the firm, delicately modelled mouth, and gave an appearance of age to the face.

‘If you do not find the farm comfortable,’ said Wantley, breaking what had begun to be an oppressive silence, ‘I hope you will return here for awhile. There won’t be a soul in London yet.’

‘Excepting my old friend, Mr. Julius Gumberg,’ objected Downing. ‘I believe he has not been out of town for years, and I sometimes think that in this, at any rate, he has proved himself wiser than some of his fellows.’

‘Mr. Julius Gumberg,’ said the other, smiling, ‘has always seemed to me, since I first had the honour of his acquaintance, to be the ideal Epicurean—the man who has mastered the art of selecting his pleasures.’

‘True!’ cried Downing abruptly. ‘But you must admit that not the least of his pleasures has always been that of benefiting his friends.’

‘But that, after all, is only a refined form of self-indulgence,’ objected Wantley, who had never been in a position so to indulge himself.

An amused smile broke over the other’s stern mouth and jaw. ‘That theory embodies the ethical nihilism of the old Utilitarians. Of course you are not serious; if you were, your position would be akin to that of the Persian mystics who teach the utter renunciation of self, the sinking of the ego in the divine whole. But then,’ added Downing, fixing his eyes on his companion, and speaking as if to himself—‘but then comes the question, What is renunciation? The Persian philosopher would give an answer very different from that offered by the Christian.’

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'Renunciation is surely the carrying out of the ascetic ideal—something more actively painful than the mere doing without.' Wantley spoke diffidently.

'Undoubtedly that is what the Christian means by the word, but is there not the higher degree of perfection involved in the French saint's dictum?' Downing stopped short; then, with very fair, albeit old-fashioned, accent, he uttered the phrase, '*Rien demander et rien refuser*. Of course, the greatest difference between the point of view held by the Persian sages and, say, the old monkish theologians is that concerning human love.'

Wantley leaned forward; he threw his cigarette out of the window. 'Ah,' he said, 'that interests me! My own father became a Roman Catholic, an act on his part, by the way, of supreme renunciation. I myself can see no possible hope of finality anywhere else; but I think that, as regards human love, I should be Persian rather than monkish.' He added, smiling a little: 'I suppose the Persian theory of love is summed up by FitzGerald;' and diffidently he quoted the most famous of the quatrains, lingering over the beautiful words, for, as he uttered them, he applied them, quite consciously, to himself and Cecily Wake. What wilderness with her but would be Paradise?

Her face rose up before him as he had seen it for a moment the day before, when, coming suddenly upon her in the little wood, her honest childish eyes had shone out welcome.

Downing looked at him thoughtfully. 'Ah, no; the Persian mystic of to-day would by no means assent to such simplicity of outlook. Jami rather than Omar summed up the national philosophy. The translation is not comparable; but, still, 'twill serve to explain to you the Persian belief that renunciation of self may be acquired through the medium of a merely human love;' and he repeated the lines:

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' Though in this world a hundred tasks thou tryest,
'Tis love alone which from thyself will save thee;
Even from earthly love thy face avert not,
Since to the real it may serve to raise thee.'

' That,' cried Wantley eagerly, ' absolutely satisfies me, and strikes me as being the highest truth! '

Downing again smiled—a quick, humorous smile. ' No doubt,' he said rather dryly, ' so thought the student who, seeking a great sage in order to be shown the way of spiritual perfection, received for answer: " If your steps have not yet trod the pathway of love, go hence, seek love, and, having met it, then return to me." The theory that true love, even if ill-bestowed, partakes of the Divine, is an essential part of the Sufi philosophy.'

' And yet,' objected Wantley, ' there are times when love, even if well bestowed, may have to be withdrawn, lest it should injure the creature beloved.'

' So I should once have said,' answered Downing, leaning forward and straightening himself in his chair; ' but now I am inclined to think that that theory has been responsible for much wrong and pain. I myself, as a young man, was greatly injured by holding for a time this very view. I was attracted to a married woman, who soon obtained over me an extraordinary and wholly pure influence. But you know what the world is like; I cannot suppose that in these matters it has altered since my day. It came to my knowledge that our friendship was arousing a certain amount of comment, and so, after much painful thought and discussion with myself, I made up my mind—wrongly, as I now believe—to withdraw myself from the connection.' He added with a certain effort: ' To this determination—come to, I can assure you and myself, from the highest motives—I trace, in looking back, some unhappiness to her, and to me the utter shipwreck of what were then my worldly chances. My withdrawal from this lady's influence brought me

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into contact with another and a very evil personality. Now, had I been then, as I now am, a student of Persian philosophy, I might be——'

Downing stopped speaking abruptly. As he threw himself back, his great powerful figure seemed to collapse. Wantley looked at him, surprised and greatly touched by the confidence.

'I will tell you,' resumed Downing, after a long pause, 'of another Persian belief, to which I now fully adhere. The sages say that as God is, of course, wholly lacking in *bukhl*—that is, stinginess or meanness—it is impossible for him to withhold from any man the thing for which he strives with sufficient earnestness; and this,' he added, looking at his companion, 'I have myself found to be true. If a man devotes all his energies to the pursuit of spiritual knowledge, he becomes in time——'

'Automatically holy,' suggested Wantley, smiling.

'And capable,' concluded Downing, 'of accomplishing what we call miracles.'

'But to such a one surely human love would be denied, even in Persia?'

'Undoubtedly, yes. But the man who has striven successfully on a lower plane, whose object has been to compass worldly power and the defeat of his enemies—to him human love is not only not denied, but may, as we have seen, bring him nearer to the Divine.'

'But meanwhile,' objected Wantley, 'love, and especially the pursuit of the beloved, must surely stay his ambition, and even interfere with his success?'

'Only inasmuch as it may render him more sensitive to physical danger and less defiant of death.'

The young man had expected a very different answer. 'Yes,' he said tentatively; 'you mean that a soldier, if a lover, is less inclined to display reckless bravery than those among his comrades who have not the same motive for self-preservation?'

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'No, no!' exclaimed Downing impatiently; 'I do not mean that at all! All history is there to prove the contrary. I was not thinking of straightforward death in any shape, but of treachery, of assassination. The man who loves'—he hesitated, his voice softened, altered in quality—'above all, the man who knows himself to be beloved, is more alive, more sensitive to the fear of annihilation, than he who only lives to accomplish certain objects. The knowledge that this is so might well make a man pause—during the brief moments when pausing is possible—and it has undoubtedly led many a one to put deliberately from himself all thought of love.'

Wantley looked at him with some curiosity, wondering whether his words had a personal application.

'Now, take my own case,' continued Downing gravely. 'I am in quite perpetual danger of assassination, and in this one matter, at any rate, I am a fatalist. But should I have the right to ask a woman to share, not only the actual risk, but also the mental strain? I once should have said no; I now say *yes*.'

Wantley was too surprised to speak.

There was a pause, then Downing spoke again, but in a different tone: 'Oddly enough, the first time was the most nearly successful. In fact, the person who had me drugged—perhaps I should say poisoned—succeeded in his object, which was to obtain a paper which I had on my person. Papers, letters, documents of every kind, are associated in my mind with mischief, and I always get rid of them as soon as possible. Mr. Gumberg has boxes full of papers I have sent him at intervals from Persia. I have arranged with him that if anything happens to me they are to be sent off to the Foreign Office. Once there'—he threw his head back and laughed grimly—'they would probably never be looked at again. In no case have I ever

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about me any papers or letters; everything of the kind is locked away.'

'Yes; but you have to carry a key,' objected Wantley.

'There you have me! I do carry a key. One is driven to trust either a human being or a lock. I prefer the lock.'

Wantley, as he left the Beach Room, felt decidedly more cheerful. The conversation had interested and amused him. Above all, he had been moved by the recital of Downing's early romance, and he wondered idly who the lady in question could have been, whether she was still living, and whether Downing ever had news of her.

During the whole of their talk there had been no word, no hint, of the existence of the other's wife, who, as Wantley, by a mere chance word uttered in his presence in the house where he had recently been staying, happened to know, was even now in England, the honoured guest of one of his uncle's old fellow-workers.

He said to himself that there was a fascination about Downing, a something which might even now make him beloved by the type of woman—Wantley imagined the meek, affectionate, and intensely feminine type of woman—who is attracted by that air of physical strength which is so often allied, in Englishmen, to mental power. He felt that the man he had just left, sitting solitary, had in his nature the capacity of enjoying ideal love and companionship, and the young man, regarding himself as so blessed, regretted that this good thing had been denied to the man who had spoken of it with so much comprehension.

Slowly making his way upwards from the shore, Wantley turned aside, and lingered a few moments on the second of the three terraces. Here, in this still, remote place, on this natural ledge of the cliff,

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guarded by a stone balustrade which terminated at intervals with fantastic urns, now gay with geranium blossoms, gaining intensity of colour by the background of blue sky and bluer waters, he had only the day before, for a delicious hour, read aloud to Cecily Wake.

From his father Wantley had inherited, and as a boy acquired, an exceptional love and knowledge of old English poetry, and, giving but grudging and unwilling praise to modern verse, he had been whimsically pleased to discover that to the girl Chaucer and La Fontaine were more familiar names than Browning and Tennyson, of whose works, indeed, she had been ignorant till she went to the Settlement, where, however, Philip Hammond had soon made her feel terribly ashamed of her ignorance.

Standing there, his thoughts of Cecily, of Downing, of Persian mysticism, chasing one another through his mind, Wantley suddenly remembered Miss Theresa Wake, doubtless still sitting solitary in her hooded chair.

II

Cecily's aunt, whom he himself already secretly regarded with the not altogether uncritical eye of a relation, was to Wantley a new and amusing variety of old lady. Miss Theresa Wake had the appearance, common to so many women of her generation, of having been petrified in early middle age. A brown hair front lent spurious youth to the thin, delicate face, and her slight, elegant figure was only now becoming bent. It was impossible to imagine her young, but equally difficult to believe that she would ever grow really old.

The young man who aspired to the honour of becoming in due course her kinsman, found a constant source of amusement in the fact that her sincere, un-

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affected piety was joined to a keen, almost morbid, interest in any worldly matter affecting her acquaintances. When with Miss Wake it was positively difficult for a sympathetic person to keep from mentioning people, and so, 'I think we shall have David Winfrith here in a few minutes,' he said, when, having sought her out, he was anxious to make amends for his neglect. 'Penelope and your niece will probably bring him back. My cousin is very anxious that he should meet Sir George Downing, who is leaving soon.'

'Leaving soon? He will be greatly missed.'

The remark was uttered primly, and yet, as Wantley felt, with some significance. The phrase diverted him, it seemed so absurdly inappropriate; for Downing had stood, and that to a singular degree, apart from the ordinary life of the villa.

But the old spinster lady was pursuing her own line of thought. 'I suppose,' she said hesitatingly, 'that the Settlement would not be affected should Penelope marry again? Of course, I am interested in the matter on account of my niece.'

Wantley looked at her, surprised. 'I don't see why it should make the slightest difference, the more so that David Winfrith has of late years taken a great part in the management of the Melancthon Settlement—in fact, the place has been the great tie between them. I should not care myself to spend the money of a man to whom my wife had once been married, but I am sure Winfrith will feel no such scruple, and the possession of the Robinson fortune might make years of difference to him in attaining what is, I suppose, his supreme ambition. After all, and of course you must not think that I am for a moment comparing the two men, where would Dizzy have been without Mrs. Lewis?'

'But what would Mr. Winfrith have to do with it?' inquired Miss Wake. 'Was he a friend of Penelope's

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husband? How could he influence the disposal of the Robinson fortune?'

It was Wantley's turn to look, and to be, astonished. 'I understood we were speaking of Penelope's marrying again,' he said quickly, 'and I thought that you, like myself, had come to the conclusion that she would in time make up her mind to marry Winfrith. He's been devoted to her ever since she can remember. Why, they were once actually engaged, and I should never be surprised any time, any moment—to-day, for instance—were she to tell us that they were to be married.'

The old lady remained silent, but he realized that her silence was not one of consent. 'Surely you were thinking of David Winfrith?' he repeated. 'There has never been, in a serious sense, anyone else.'

A little colour came to Miss Wake's thin, wrinkled cheeks, and she began to look very uncomfortable. 'I was thinking of someone very different,' she said at last, 'but you have made me feel that I was quite wrong.'

An odious suspicion darted into the young man's mind. He suddenly felt both angry and disgusted. After all this constant dwelling on other people and their affairs must often lead to ridiculous and painful mistakes, to unwarrantable suspicions. 'You surely cannot mean——' he began rather sternly, and waited for her to speak.

'I was thinking of Sir George Downing,' she answered, meeting his perturbed look with one of calm confidence. 'Surely, Lord Wantley, now that I have suggested the idea, you must admit that they are greatly interested in one another? At no time of my life have I seen much of lovers; but, though I have not wished in any way to watch Penelope and this gentleman, and though I have, of course, said nothing to my niece Cecily, it has seemed to me quite clear that there is an attachment. In fact'—she

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spoke with growing courage, emboldened by his silence—‘I have no doubt about my cousin’s feelings. Would not the marriage be a suitable one? Of course there must be a certain difference of age between them, but she seems, indeed I am sure she is, so very devoted to him.’

‘I confess the thought of such a thing never occurred to me.’

Wantley spoke slowly, unwillingly; and even while he uttered the words there came to him, as in an unbroken, confirmatory chain, the memory of little incidents, words spoken by Penelope, others left unsaid, her altered manner to himself — much unwelcomed evidence that Miss Wake had been perhaps clear-sighted when they had all been blind. He felt a sudden pang of pity for his cousin, a feeling as if he had suddenly seen, through an open door, a sight not meant for his eyes. For a moment he deliberated as to whether he should tell Miss Wake of the one fact which made impossible any happy ending to what she believed was true of the relations between Mrs. Robinson and Sir George Downing.

‘I think I ought to tell you,’ he said at length, ‘that a marriage between them is out of the question. Sir George Downing has a wife living. They are separated, but not divorced.’ There was a painful moment of silence; then he added hastily: ‘I know that my cousin is fully aware of the fact.’

Then, to his relief, Miss Wake spoke as he would have had her speak. ‘If that is so,’ she cried, ‘I have been utterly mistaken, and I beg your and Penelope’s pardon. It is easy to make mistakes of the kind. You see, I have lived so long out of the world.’

There was a note of appeal in the thin, high voice.

‘But indeed,’ said Wantley quickly, ‘my cousin is very unconventional, and your mistake was a natural one. I myself, had I not known the circum-

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stances, would probably have come to the same conclusion.'

Their eyes met, and for a brief moment unguarded glances gave the lie to their spoken words.

CHAPTER X

'On ne choisit pas la femme que l'on doit aimer.'

I

THE Rectory at Shagisham had the great charm of situation. In his study old Mr. Winfrith stood on the same level as the top of his church steeple, and his windows commanded wide views of the valley where lay the scattered houses composing his cure, of the low hills beyond, and of the sea. The best had been done that could be done with the steep, wind-swept garden, and the square, low rooms, which had seen little, if any, alteration in forty years, opened out upon a lawn kept green with constant watering.

To Cecily the old-fashioned house, with its curious air of austere, unfeminine refinement, was very interesting. She had never seen a country clergyman at home, and her imagination had formed a picture of Winfrith's father very different from the small, delicate-looking old man who welcomed her and Mrs. Robinson with great warmth of manner, while Winfrith himself showed almost boyish pleasure at the unexpected visit. 'They must be very lonely here sometimes,' was Cecily's unspoken thought, as the old clergyman ushered her with some ceremony into the drawing-room, which had the curious un-lived-in look so often seen in a room associated, to those still living, with a dead woman's presence.

Before passing out on to the lawn Mr. Winfrith

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directed Cecily's attention to a portrait which hung over the mantelpiece. It was that of a brilliant-looking girl, dressed more or less gipsy-fashion, the colouring of her red cheeks, so bright as to give the impression that the sitter had rouged, being daringly repeated in a scarf twisted round her dark hair. 'David's mother,' he said proudly. 'Do you not think there is a great likeness between them?'

Cecily looked doubtfully at the picture. 'Of course he is not nearly so handsome'—Mr. Winfrith spoke rather plaintively—'but I assure you he is really very like her. This portrait was painted before our marriage. Lord Wantley—I mean Mrs. Robinson's father—thought it one of the best ever painted by the artist'—Mr. Winfrith looked puzzled—'I forget his name, though at one time I knew him quite well. I'm sure you would know it, for he's a great man. He was often at Monk's Eype, and painted Lady Wantley several times. But this was one of his early efforts, and I myself'—the old man lowered his voice, fearing lest the stricture should be overheard by his other guest—'much prefer his earlier manner.' And then he led her out into the garden, and handed her over to the care of his son, while he himself turned eagerly, confidently, to Penelope.

David Winfrith at Shagisham, waiting on his old father, acting as courteous host to his own and that dear father's guest, seemed a very different person from the man who acted as mentor to the Melancthon Settlement.

Only the most unemotional, and, intellectually speaking, limited, human being is totally unaffected by environment. Winfrith, when at home, not only appeared another person to his London self, but he behaved, and even felt, differently. At Shagisham he came under the only influence to which he had ever consciously submitted himself—that of his simple and spiritually minded father, a man so much

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older than himself that he seemed a survival from a long-past generation.

Another cause, one known fully to very few beside himself, made him a different man when at home. There, at Shagisham, he never forgot certain facts connected with the early life of his parents—facts made known to him in a letter written by his mother before her death, and handed to him by his father when they had returned, forlornly enough, from her funeral. And after the boy—he was sixteen at the time—had read and burnt the letter, he had looked at the lovely valley, the beautiful old church, and the pretty rectory, with altered, alien eyes.

Had Winfrith followed his instinct he would never have come there again, but he had forced himself to keep this feeling hidden from his father, and many times, both when at college and, later, through his working year, he took long journeys in order to spend a few brief hours with the old man.

But he had no love for the place where he had spent his lonely childhood, and he did not like Shagisham any the better when he perceived that he had become in the opinion of the neighbourhood which had once looked askance at Mr. Winfrith and his only child, an important personage, able to influence the fate of lowly folk seeking a job, and that of younger sons of the great folk, bound, with less excuse, on the same errand.

Walking beside Penelope's young friend, he took pains to make himself pleasant, and, happily inspired, he at last observed: 'And so you have made friends with Lord Wantley? He's a very good fellow, and there's much more in him than Mrs. Robinson is ever willing to admit. He might be very useful to the Settlement.' Cecily said to herself that she had perhaps misjudged her companion, and she determined that she would henceforth listen to his criticisms of her schemes with more submission.

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But what mattered to David Winfrith the young girl's good opinion? Penelope's unexpected coming had put him in charity with all the world.

Certain men are instinctive monogamists. For this man the world held no woman but she whom he still thought of as Penelope Wantley. There had been times when he would willingly have let his fancy stray, but, unfortunately for himself, his fancy had ever refused to stray.

Of late years he had been often thrown with beautiful and clever women, some of whom had doubtless felt for him that passing, momentary attraction which to certain kinds of natures holds out so great an allurements. But Winfrith, in these matters, was wholly apart from most of those who composed the world in which he had to spend a certain portion of his time.

Even now, while making conversation with Cecily Wake, he was longing to hear what Penelope could be saying that appeared to interest his father so much. Mrs. Robinson had taken the arm of the little old clergyman; they had turned from the wide lawn and steep garden beyond, and were looking at the house, Penelope talking, the other listening silently. 'No doubt,' said Winfrith to himself, 'they are only discussing what sort of creeper ought to be added to the west wall this autumn!'

At last he and his father changed partners, and when the latter, taking charge of Cecily, had led her off to the sloping kitchen-garden, where stood the well, the boring of which had been the old man's one extravagance since he had first come to Shagisham, unnumbered years before, Mrs. Robinson said abruptly: 'Whenever I see your father, David, I can't help wishing that you were more like him! He is so much broader and more kindly than you are—in fact, there seems very little of him in you at all——'

'If you are so devoted to him,' he said, smiling, but

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rather nettled, 'I wish you would come and see him oftener. You know how fond he is of you.' He added, but in a tone which destroyed the sentiment conveyed in the phrase: 'In that one matter, at any rate, you must admit that he and I are very much alike!'

Something in the way he said the words displeased Mrs. Robinson. To her Winfrith's deep, voiceless affection was as much her own, to do what she willed with, as were any one of her rare physical attributes. The thought of this deep feeling lessening in depth or in extent was even now intolerable; and, while giving herself every licence, and arrogating every right to go her own way, it incensed her that he should, even to herself, allude lightly to his attachment. She answered obliquely, eager to punish him for the lightest deviation from his usual allegiance.

'I know I ought to come oftener,' she said coolly, 'but then, of course, you yourself hitherto have always been the magnet—not, to be sure, a very powerful magnet, for 'tis a long time since I've been here.'

Winfrith reddened. Try as he would—and as a younger man he had often tried—he could not cure himself of blushing when moved or angered. His mother, to the very end of her life, had been proud of a beautiful complexion.

'I was just telling your father'—she gave him a strange sideways glance—'the story of the traveller who, crossing the border of a strange country, came upon a magnificent building which seemed familiar, though he knew it to be impossible that he had ever seen it before. Then suddenly he realized that it was one of the castles he had built in Spain! Now, there, David,' said Mrs. Robinson, pointing with her parasol to the old-fashioned house before them, 'is the only castle I ever built in Spain, and I never come here without wondering what sort of dwelling

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I should have found it.' As he made no answer, she turned and drew nearer to him, exclaiming as she did so: 'Ah, que j'étais heureuse, dans ces bons jours où nous étions si malheureux!'

French was to Winfrith not so much a language as a vocabulary for the fashioning of treaties and protocols, a collection of counters on whose painfully considered, often tortuous combinations the fate of men and nations constantly depended. It may be doubted therefore, whether, if uttered by any other voice, he would have understood the significance of the odd phrase in which his companion summed up the later philosophy of so many women's lives. As it was, its meaning found its way straight to his heart. He turned and looked at his companion fixedly—a long, searching look. He opened his lips——

But Penelope had said enough—had said, indeed, more than she had meant to say, and produced a far stronger effect than she had intended to produce.

Mentally and physically she drew back, and as she moved away, not very far, but still so as to be no longer almost touching him, 'You owe my visit to-day,' she cried quickly, and rather nervously, 'to the fact that Sir George Downing, the man they call Persian Downing, is anxious to make your acquaintance. He and Ludovic have made friends, and I think Ludovic wants to bring him over to see you.'

'Do you mean that Sir George Downing is actually staying with you?' he asked, with some astonishment. 'I had no idea that any of you knew him.'

'We met him abroad, and he has just been staying a few days at Monk's Eype. He wanted to finish an important paper or report, and we had the Beach Room arranged as a study for him. But he is rather peculiar, and he fancies he could work better in complete solitude, and so, on our way back from here, Cecily and I are going to see if we can get him lodgings at Kingpole Farm. But, David, he really is most

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anxious to meet you. He says you are the only man in the new Government who knows anything about Persia; one of the chapters in your book seems to have impressed him very much, and he wants to talk to you about it.'

As she spoke her eyes dropped. She avoided looking at his face. The bait was a gross one, but then the hand which held it was so delicate, so trusted, and so loved.

'A friend of Wantley's?' he repeated. 'I wish I had known that before.'

'I don't think the acquaintance has been a long one, but they seem to get on very well together.' The words were uttered hurriedly. Penelope was beginning to feel deeply ashamed of the part she was playing.

Winfrith went on, with some eagerness: 'How extraordinary that Persian Downing should find his way down here! He is one of the few people whom I have always wished to meet.'

Her task was becoming almost too easy, and with some perverseness she remarked coldly: 'And yet I believe your present chief—I mean Lord Rashleigh—refused to see him when he was in London?'

'Refused is not quite the word. Of course, such a man as Downing has the faults of his qualities. He arrived in town on a Tuesday, I believe; he requested an interview on the Wednesday; and then, while the chief was humming and hawing, and consulting the people who were up on the whole matter, and who could have told him what to say and how far he could go in meeting Downing—who, of course, has come back to England with his head packed full of schemes and projects—the man suddenly disappeared, leaving no address! Rashleigh was very much put out, the more so that, as you doubtless know, our people distrust Downing.'

Penelope was looking down, digging the point of her

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parasol into the soft turf at their feet. 'There was some story, wasn't there, when Sir George Downing was a young man? Some woman was mixed up with it. What was the truth of it all?'

He hesitated, then answered unwillingly: 'The draft of an important paper disappeared, and was practically traced from Downing's possession to that of a Russian woman with whom he was known to have been on friendly terms. But it's admitted now that he was very harshly treated over the whole affair. I believe he had actually met the lady at a F.O. reception! He may have been a fool—probably he was a fool—but even at the time no one suspected him of having been anything else. The woman simply and very cleverly stole the paper in question.'

'I am sure he ought to be very much obliged to you for this kind version of what took place.'

'Well,' he said good-humouredly, 'I happen to have taken some trouble to find out the truth, and I'm sorry if the story isn't sensational enough to please you. But the consequences were serious enough for Downing. He was treated with great severity, and finally went off to America. It was there, at Washington, that he became acquainted with my uncle, and, oddly enough, I have in my possession some of the letters written by him when first in Persia. I shall now have the opportunity of giving them back to him.'

'And out there—in Persia, I mean—did you never come across him?'

'Unfortunately, I just missed him. No one here understands the sort of position he has made for himself—and indeed, for us—out there. It was the one country, till he came on the scene, where we were not only lacking in influence, but so lacking in prestige that we were being perpetually outwitted. Downing, as I reminded Rashleigh the other day, has always been pulling our chestnuts out of the fire. Of course,

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you can't expect such a man to have the virtues of a Sunday-school teacher.'

Penelope still kept her eyes averted from Winfrith's face, still ruthlessly dug holes in her old friend's turf.

'And when in Persia, in Teheran, what sort of life does he lead there?' She tried to speak indifferently, but her heart was beating fast and irregularly.

But Winfrith, seeing nothing, answered willingly enough: 'Oh, a most extraordinary sort of life. One of amazing solitariness. He has always refused to mix with the social life of the Legations. Perhaps that's why he acquired such an influence elsewhere. Of course, I heard a great deal about him, and I'll tell you what impressed me most of the various things I learned. They say that no man—not even out there—has had his life attempted so often, and in such various ways, as has Persian Downing. All sorts of people, native and foreign, have an interest in his disappearance.'

Penelope's hand trembled. The colour left her cheek.

'How does he escape?' she asked. 'Has he any special way of guarding himself from attack?'

'If he has, no one knows what it is. He has never asked for official protection, but it seems that from that point of view his G.C.B. has been quite useful, for now there's a sort of idea that his body and soul possess a British official value, which before they lacked. He's been "minted" so to speak.'

But Mrs. Robinson hardly heard him. She was following her own trend of thought. There was a question she longed, yet feared, to ask, and though desperately ashamed at what she was about to do, she made up her mind that she could not let pass this rare, this unique, opportunity of learning what she craved to know. 'I suppose that he really *has* lived alone?' she asked insistently. And then, seeing that she must speak yet more plainly: 'I suppose—I mean, was

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there anything against his private character, out there, in Teheran?'

A look of annoyance crossed Winfrith's face. He was old-fashioned enough to consider such questions unseemly, especially when asked by a woman. 'Certainly not,' he replied rather stiffly. 'I heard no whisper of such a thing. Had there been anything of the kind, I should, of course, have heard it. Teheran is full of petty gossip, as are all those sorts of places.'

As they turned to meet old Mr. Winfrith and Cecily Wake, Penelope thought, with mingled feelings of relief and pain, of how easy it had all been, and yet how painful—at moments, how agonizing—to herself.

The father and son were loth to let them go, and even after the old man had parted from his guests David Winfrith walked on by the side of the low cart, leading the pony down the steep, stone-strewn hill which led to the village, set, as is so often the way in Dorset, in an oasis of trees. As they rounded a sharp corner and came in sight of a large house standing within high walls, surrounded on three sides by elms, but on one side bare and very near to the lonely road, he suddenly said 'Good-bye,' and, turning on his heel, did not stay a moment to gaze after them, as Cecily, looking round, had thought he would.

II

Penelope checked the pony's inclination to gallop along the short, smooth piece of road which lay before them, and, when actually passing the large house which stood at the beginning of the village, she almost brought him to a standstill.

Cecily then saw that the blinds, bright red in colour, of the long row of upper windows—in fact, all those that could be seen above the high wall—were drawn down.

'Look well at that place,' said her companion

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suddenly, 'and I will tell you why David Winfrith never willingly passes by here when he is staying at Shagisham.'

Till that moment Mrs. Robinson had had no intention of telling Cecily anything about this place, or of Winfrith's connection with its solitary occupant, but she wished to escape from her own thoughts, to forget for a moment certain passages in a conversation, the memory of which distressed and shamed her.

To attain this end she went further on the road of betrayal, telling that which should not have been told. 'It's a very curious story,' she said, 'and David will never know that I have told it to you.'

As she spoke she shook the reins more loosely through her hand, and gave the pony his head.

'I must begin by telling you that Mrs. Winfrith, David's mother, was much younger than her husband, and in every way utterly unlike him. Before her marriage she had been something of a beauty, a spoilt, headstrong girl, engaged to some man of whom her people had not approved, and who finally jilted her. She came down here on a visit, met Mr. Winfrith, flirted with him, and finally married him. For a time all seemed to go very well: they had no children, and as he was very indulgent she often went away and stayed with her own people, who were rich and of the world worldly. It was from one of them, by the way—from a brother of hers, a diplomatist—that David got his nice little fortune. But at the time I am telling you of there was no thought of David. Not long after Mr. and Mrs. Winfrith's marriage, another couple came to Shagisham, and took Shagisham House, the place we have just passed. Their name was Mason, and they were very well off. But soon it became known that the wife was practically insane—in fact, that she had to have nurses and keepers. One of her crazes was that of having everything about her red; the furniture was all

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upholstered in bright-red silk, the woodwork was all painted red, and people even said she slept in red linen sheets! Mrs. Winfrith became quite intimate with these people. She was there constantly, and she was supposed to have a soothing effect on Mrs. Mason. In time—in fact, in a very short time—she showed her sympathy with the husband in the most practical manner, for one day they both disappeared from Shagisham together.'

'Together?' repeated Cecily, bewildered. 'How do you mean?'

'I mean'—Penelope was looking straight before her, urging the pony to go yet faster, although they were beginning to mount the interminable hill leading to Kingpole Farm—'I mean that Mrs. Winfrith ran away from her husband, and that Mr. Mason left his mad wife to take care of herself. Of course, as an actual fact, there were plenty of people to look after her, and I don't suppose she ever understood what had taken place. But you can imagine how the affair affected the neighbourhood, and the kind of insulting pity which was lavished on Mr. Winfrith. My father, who at that time only knew him slightly, tried to induce him to leave Shagisham, and even offered to get him another living. But he refused to stir, and so he and Mrs. Mason both stayed on here, while Mrs. Winfrith and Mr. Mason were heard of at intervals as being in Italy, apparently quite happy in each other's society, and quite unrepentant.'

'Poor Mr. Winfrith!' said Cecily slowly. But she was thinking of David, not of the placid old man who seemed so proud of his flowers and of his garden.

'Yes, indeed, poor Mr. Winfrith! But in a way the worst for him was yet to come. One winter day a lawyer's clerk came down to Shagisham House to tell the housekeeper and Mrs. Mason's attendants that their master was dead. He had died of typhoid fever at Pisa, leaving no will, and having made no arrange-

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ments either for his own wife, or for the lady who, in Italy, had of course passed as his wife. Well, Mr. Winfrith started off that same night for Pisa, and about a fortnight later he brought Mrs. Winfrith back to Shagisham.'

Penelope waited awhile, but Cecily made no comment.

'For a time,' Mrs. Robinson went on, 'I believe they lived like lepers. The farmers made it an excuse to drop coming to church, and only one woman belonging to their own class ever went near them.'

'I know who that was,' said Cecily, breaking her long silence—'at least, I think it must have been your mother.'

'Yes,' said Penelope, 'yes, it was my mother. How clever of you to guess! Mamma used to go and see her regularly. And one day, finding how unhappy the poor woman seemed to be, she asked my father to allow her to ask her to come and stay at Monk's Eype. Very characteristically, as I think, he let mamma have her way in the matter; but during Mrs. Winfrith's visit he himself went away, otherwise people might have thought that he had condoned her behaviour.'

She paused for a moment.

'Something so strange happened during that first stay of Mrs. Winfrith's at Monk's Eype. Mamma found out, or rather Mrs. Winfrith confided to her, that she had fallen in love, rather late in the day, with Mr. Winfrith, and that she could not bear the gentle, cold, distant way in which he treated her. Then mamma did what I have always thought was a very brave thing. She went over to Shagisham, all by herself, and spoke to him, telling him that if he had really forgiven his wife he ought to treat her differently.'

'And then?' asked Cecily.

'And then'—Penelope very shortly ended the

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story—‘she—mamma, I mean—persuaded him to go away for six months with Mrs. Winfrith. They spent the time in America, where her brother was living as attaché to the British Legation. After that they came home, and about five years before I made my appearance, David was born.’

‘And Mrs. Mason?’ asked Cecily.

‘Mrs. Mason has lived on all these years in the house we passed just now. I have myself seen her several times peeping out of one of the windows. She has a thin, rather clever-looking face, and long grey curls. She was probably out just now, for she takes a drive every afternoon; but she never leaves her closed carriage, and, though she can walk quite well, they have to carry her out to it. She is intensely interested in weddings and funerals, and, on the very rare occasions when there is anything of the sort going on at Shagisham, her carriage is always drawn up close to the gate of the churchyard. She was there the day Mrs. Winfrith was buried. My father, who came down from London to be present, was very much shocked, and thought someone ought to have told the coachman to drive on; but of course no one liked to do it, and so Mrs. Mason saw the last of the woman who had been her rival.’

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CHAPTER XI

' Est-ce qu'une vie de femme se raconte? elle se sent, elle passe, elle apparait.'—SAINTE BEUVE.

I

THAT Sir George Downing should spend the last days of his sojourn in Dorset at Kingpole Farm, a seventeenth-century homestead, where, according to local tradition, Charles II. had spent a night in hiding during his hurried flight after the Battle of Worcester, had been Mrs. Robinson's wish and suggestion. He had welcomed the idea of leaving Monk's Eype with an eagerness which had pained her, though in her heart she was aware that she had thus devised a way out of what had become to them both a most difficult and false situation.

Very soon after Downing's arrival at Monk's Eype Penelope had become acutely conscious of the mistake she had made in asking him to come there. After painful moments spent with him—moments often of embarrassed silence—she had divined, with beating heart and flushed cheek, why all seemed to go ill between them during this time of waiting and of suspense, which she had actually believed would prove a prolongation of the halcyon, dream-like days that had followed their first meeting.

This beautiful, intelligent woman, with her strange half-knowledge of the realities of human life, and the less strange ignorances, which she kept closely hidden from those about her, had often received, especially in her ' Perdita ' days, confidences which had inspired her with a deep distaste of those ignoble shifts and ruses which perforce so often surround a passion not in itself ignoble, or in any real sense impure.

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She had been glad to assure herself that in this case—that of her own relation to Downing—nothing of the kind need sully the beginnings of what she believed with all her heart would be a noble and lifelong love-story. Accordingly, there had been a tacit pact as to the reserve and restraint which should govern their relations the one to the other during the few weeks of Downing's stay in England.

When the time came they would leave together openly, and with a certain measured dignity, but till then they would be friends, merely friends, not lovers.

But Mrs. Robinson had not considered it essential, or indeed desirable, that there should be no meeting in the interval, and she had seen no reason why her friend's schemes should not have what slender help was possible from the exercise of her woman's wits. Hence she had planned the meeting with David Winfrith; hence she had asked Downing to become one of her guests at Monk's Eype, and after some demur he had reluctantly obeyed.

During the days that had immediately followed his coming, days which saw Downing avoiding rather than seeking his hostess's presence, Penelope often pondered over the words, the first he had uttered when they had found themselves alone: 'I feel like a thief—nay, like a murderer—here!' Extravagant, foolish words, uttered by one whose restraint and wisdom had held for her from the first a curious fascination.

Alas! She knew now how ill-advised she had been to bring him to Monk's Eype, to place him in sharp juxtaposition with her mother, with her cousin Wantley, even with such a girl as Cecily Wake. The very simplicity of the life led by Mrs. Robinson's little circle of unworldly, simple-minded guests made intimate talk between herself and Downing difficult, the more so that feminine instinct kept few her visits to the Beach Room.

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Now and again, however, a softened glance from the powerful lined face, a muttered word expressive of deep measureless feeling, the feel of his hand grasping hers, would suddenly seem to prove that everything was indeed as she wished it to be between them, and for a few hours she would feel, if not content, at least at peace.

But even then there was always the haunting thought that some extraneous circumstance—sometimes she wondered if it could have been any foolish, careless word said by Wantley—had modified the close intimacy of their relation.

II

There had been a week of this strain and strange chill between them, when one night Penelope, feeling intolerably sore and full of vague misgivings, suddenly determined to seek Downing out in the Beach Room. It fell about in this wise. After the quiet evening had at last come to an end, she went upstairs with Cecily and old Miss Wake, dismissed Motey, and then returned to the studio, hoping he would come to her there.

But an hour wore itself away, and he did not come.

Mrs. Robinson went out on to the moonlit terrace, and for awhile paced up and down, watching the lights in the villa being put out one by one. She knew that her old nurse would not go to sleep till she, Penelope, were safe in bed; and she felt, though she could not see them, Mrs. Mote's eyes peering down at her, watching this impatient walking up and down in the bright moonlight. But what would once have so keenly annoyed her no longer had power to touch her. She even smiled when the candle in Mrs. Mote's room was extinguished, and the blind carefully and ostentatiously drawn down. She knew well that the old woman would sit behind it, waiting impatiently, full

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of suspicious anger, till she saw her mistress return from the place whither she was now bound.

As she went down the steps leading to the shore, Penelope, her eyes cast down, pitied herself with the frank self-pity of a child deprived of some longed-for happiness; she had so looked forward to these days with Downing, spent in this beloved place, which she was about to give up, perhaps never to see again, for his sake.

At last, when standing on the strip of dry sand heaped above the wet, glittering expanse stretching out to the dark sea, Penelope came upon the circle of bright light, warring with the moonlit shore below, thrown by Downing's lamp through the window of the Beach Room.

The sight affected her curiously. For a moment she felt as if she must turn back; after all, he was engaged upon matters of great moment, perhaps of even greater moment to himself than the question of their relation the one to the other. She suddenly felt ashamed of disturbing him at his work—real work which she knew must be done before he went back to town.

But the window, through which streamed out the shaft of greenish-white light, was wide open, and soon Downing heard, mingling with the surge of the sea, the sound, the unmistakable dragging sound, of a woman's long clinging skirt.

He got up, opened the door, and, coming out took her in his arms and drew her silently back with him into the Beach Room. Then, bending down, his lips met and trembled on hers, and Penelope, her resentment gone, felt her eyes fill with tears.

A kiss, so trifling a gift on the part of some women as to be scarcely worth the moments lost in the giving and receiving, is with other women, indeed with many other women, the forerunner of complete surrender.

In her thirty years of life two men only had kissed

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Penelope Wantley—the one Winfrith, the other Downing.

To-night there came to her with amazing clearness the vision of a garden, ill-cared for, deserted, but oh! how beautiful, stretching behind a Savoy inn in the mountainous country about Pol les Thermes. There she and Downing, drawn—driven—to one another by a trembling, irresistible impulse, had kissed for the first time, and for a moment, then as now, she had lain in his arms, looking up at him with piteous, questioning eyes. How long ago that morning seemed, and yet how few had been the kisses in between!

Suddenly she felt him loosen his grip of her shoulders; and he held her away from himself, at arms' length, as deliberately, in the tone of one who has a right to an answer, he asked her a certain question regarding herself and Melancthon Robinson.

She was pained and startled, reluctant to tell that which she had always kept secret, and which she believed—so little are we aware that most things concerning us are known to all our world—had never been suspected. But she admitted his right to question her, and found time to whisper to her secret self, 'My answer must surely make him glad'; and so, her eyes lowering before his piercing, insistent gaze, she told him the truth.

But, as he heard her, Downing relaxed his hold on her, and with something like a groan he said: 'Why did I not know this before? Why should I have had to wait till now to learn such a thing from you?' And as she, surprised and distressed, hesitated, not knowing what to say, he to her amazement turned away, and in a preoccupied tone, even with a smile, said suddenly: 'Go. Go now, my dear. It is too late for you to be down here. I have work to finish to-night.' Then he opened the door, and, with no further word or gesture of affection, shut her out in what seemed for the moment utter darkness.

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But as she slowly began groping her way up the steps, sick at heart, bewildered by the strangeness, by the coldness, of his manner, the door of the Beach Room again opened, and she heard him calling her back with a hoarse, eager cry.

She hesitated, then turned to see his tall, lean figure filling up the doorway, and outlined for a moment against the bright lamplit room, before he strode across the sand to where she stood, trembling.

Once more he took her in his arms, once more he murmured the words of broken, passionate endearment for which her heart had hungered, only, however, at last again to say, but no longer with a smile: 'Go. Go now, my beloved—for I am only a man after all—only a man as other men are.'

Then for some days Penelope had found him again become strangely cold and alien. She had felt the situation between them intolerable, and suddenly she had suggested the sojourn at Kingpole Farm. And on the eve of his departure Downing again seemed to become instinct with the mysterious ardour he had shown from the first moment they had met, from the flash of time during which their eyes had exchanged their first long, intimate, probing look.

Mrs. Mote had followed, with foreboding, agonizing jealousy, this interlude of days in a drama of which she had seen the first, and of which she was beginning to divine the last, act.

It is not the apparently inevitable sin, so much as the apparently avoidable folly, which most distresses those onlookers who truly love the sinners and the foolish. During those still summer days the old nurse felt she could have borne anything but this strange beguilement of her mistress, by one whom the maid regarded as having outlived the age when men make women happy. The sight of Mrs. Robinson, with whom, to Motey's doting eyes, time had stood still,

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hanging on his words, having eyes only for this man, who, though no longer young, yet seemed even older than his age, struck the watcher as monstrous because unnatural.

So far, Mrs. Mote had been unselfish in her repugnance for the irrevocable step towards which she felt Penelope to be drifting, but of late a nearer and more personal terror had taken possession of the old woman. She was beginning to suspect that she herself was to have no part in Mrs. Robinson's new life, and the suspicion drove her nearly beside herself with anger and impotent distress.

Many incidents, of themselves trifling, had instilled this suspicion in her mind. Mrs. Robinson was trying to do for herself all the things that Motey, first as nurse, and later as maid, had always done for her. Sitting in her own room, next door to that of her mistress, and feeling too proud and sore to come unless sent for, Mrs. Mote would hear the opening and shutting of cupboards and drawers, the seeking and the putting away by Penelope—this last an almost incredible portent—of her own hat, veil, gloves, and shoes!

Even more significant was the fact that of late Penelope had become so considerate, so tender, of the old woman who had always been about her. How happy a sharp, impatient word would now have made Mrs. Mote! But no such word was ever uttered. Instead, Mrs. Robinson had actually suggested that her maid should have a holiday. 'Me? A holiday? and what should I do with a holiday?' Motey had repeated, bewildered, and then with painful sarcasm had added, 'I suppose, ma'am, that is why you are learning to do your own hair?'

She had watched her enemy's departure for Kingpole Farm with sombre eyes and sinking heart, wondering what this unexpected happening might portend to her mistress.

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The day after that which had seen Downing leaving Monk's Eype, Mrs. Robinson had found her riding-habit, and also a short skirt she often wore when driving herself, laid out with some elaboration. 'I have everything ready,' had said the old nurse sourly, 'for there will be many rides and drives now, I reckon.' And Penelope, forgetting her new gentleness, had exclaimed angrily: 'Motey, you are intolerable! Put those things away at once!'

III

In most people's lives there has come, at times, a sequence of days, full of deep calm without, full of inward strife and disturbance within.

The departure of Sir George Downing from Monk's Eype brought no peace to the two women to whom his presence there had been of moment. Mrs. Mote believed that his going heralded some immediate change in Mrs. Robinson's life; as far as possible she never let her mistress out of her sight, and the tarrying of Penelope from the villa an hour later than she had been expected to do, more than once threw the old nurse into a state of abject alarm. But Motey, during those still days, had lost the clue to her nursling's heart and mind.

For some days and nights after Downing had left her, and she had deliberately denied herself the solace of his letters, Mrs. Robinson was haunted by the thought—sometimes, it seemed, by the actual physical presence—of her first love, David Winfrith.

The memory of the hours spent by her with him at Shagisham constantly recurred, bringing a strange mingling of triumph and pain. How badly she had behaved to him that day! how treacherously! it might almost be said, how wantonly! And yet, at the time, during that moment when she had come close to him, and uttered those plaintive words which

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had so greatly moved him, Downing for the moment had been blotted out of her memory, so intense had been her desire to bring Winfrith back to his old allegiance.

Now, looking back at the little scene, she knew that she had succeeded in her wish—but at what a cost! And in a few weeks, she could now count the time by days, it would become the business of Winfrith's life to forget her. She knew how his narrow, upright mind would judge her action; with what utter condemnation and horror he would remember that conversation held between them, especially that portion of it which concerned Sir George Downing.

The knowledge that Winfrith must in time realize how ill she had used him that day brought keen humiliation in its train. 'I have been far more married to him than I was to poor Melancthon!' she cried half aloud to herself during one of the restless, unhappy nights, spent by her in thinking over the past and considering the present; and the thought had come into her mind: 'If I had married David, and then if he, instead of Melancthon, had died, how much happier I should be to-day than I am now!'

But even as she had uttered the words, and though believing herself to be the only creature awake in the still house, Penelope in the darkness had blushed violently, marvelling to find herself capable of having conceived so monstrous an idea.

It added to Mrs. Robinson's unrest and disquiet to know, as she had done through Wantley, now—oh, irony!—the only link between herself and Kingpole Farm, that Downing and Winfrith had met more than once. The interviews, or so she gathered from her cousin, had been, from Downing's point of view, satisfactory, but she longed feverishly to know more—to learn how David Winfrith had comported himself, what impression he had made on the older man.

It was significant that Penelope never gave a

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thought as to how Downing had impressed Winfrith. To her mind the matter could not admit of doubt—his personality must dominate all those with whom it came into contact.

Neither man knew of her relation, past or present, to the other. Still, she felt a longing to be assured that all had gone well between them. It added to her vague discomfort that Wantley, when telling her of what had been the first meeting between the two men, had given her a quick, penetrating look from out his half-closed eyes, and then had glanced away in obvious embarrassment.

Well, she would soon have to see Winfrith, for on him she counted—and she never saw the refinement of cruelty involved—to make smooth, as regarded certain material matters, the path before her.

Mrs. Robinson wished to begin her new life stripped, as far as might be possible, of all that must recall to her that which had come and gone since she was Penelope Wantley. She hoped that by giving up the great fortune left by her husband, she might blot out the recollection, not only of poor Melancthon Robinson, for whose memory she had ever felt a certain impatient kindness, but also of David Winfrith, to whom her tie of late years had been so close, though of that she had told Downing nothing.

This intention of material renouncement had not been imagined in the first instance by Penelope—the Robinson fortune had cost her so little and had been hers so long! But Downing, during one of their first intimate talks and discussions concerning the future, had assumed that, on her return to England, she would at once begin arranging for its dispersion, and she had instantly accepted the idea, and felt herself eager to act on it. Indeed, she had said after a short pause, and it was the first time that she had mentioned to this new friend and still unfamiliar lover, the oldest of her friends and the most familiar of

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her lovers, 'David Winfrith will help me about it all.'

'The new Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs?' he had asked, and she had answered quickly: 'Yes, his father is one of the trustees of the Settlement, and he has helped me a good deal over it.'

No more had then been said, and since her return to England Mrs. Robinson had done nothing concerning the matter.

But now she must bestir herself, see Winfrith, and that soon. He knew all about her affairs, and she intended that he should help her to hasten the inevitable formalities. As to what she was to say to him, how to offer, to one so matter-of-fact and clear-headed, any adequate reason for her proposed action, she trusted to her wit and to his obtuseness. He had often found the courage to tell her that some adequate provision should be made by her for the Melancthon Settlement, and that, as matters stood, too much was left to her own conscience and her own generosity. Well, she would now remind him of his unpalatable advice, and tell him that at last she was about to follow it.

Penelope also found time, during the days which followed Downing's departure, to think of her mother—to wonder, with tightened throat, how Lady Wantley would meet the ordeal coming so swiftly to meet and overwhelm her.

Even with those whose thoughts, emotions, and consciences seemed channelled in the narrowest grooves it is often difficult to foresee with what eyes, both of the body and of the soul, they will view any given set of circumstances. Lady Wantley had always seemed extremely wide-minded, in some ways nebulously so; but this had been in a measure owing, so Penelope now reminded herself, to the fact that she had lived a life so spiritually detached from those about her.

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Since her husband's death the mother's loyalty to her only child had been unswerving, and she seemed to have transferred to Penelope the unquestioning trust she had felt in Penelope's father.

Old friends, including Mr. Julius Gumberg, had ventured to remonstrate, and very seriously, when the lovely, impulsive girl had announced her sudden engagement, after a strangely short acquaintance, to Melancthon Robinson; but Lady Wantley—and her daughter, looking back in after years, had often wondered sorely, with a shuddering retrospection, that it had been so—had seemed quite content, quite certain, that her beloved child was being Divinely guided.

She had accepted, with the same curious detachment, the fact of Penelope's widowhood, and during the years which followed had encouraged her daughter to lead the life that suited her best, looking on with indulgent eyes while Mrs. Robinson enjoyed what she always later recalled as the 'Perdita' stage of her existence.

This had been the period when the girl-widow, released from the bondage into which she had entered so lightly, returned with intense zest to the delightful frivolous world of which she had seen but little before her marriage. For three or four years Mrs. Robinson enjoyed all that this delicately dissipated section of society could give her in the way of lightly balanced emotion and fresh sensation, and her mother had been apparently in no wise shocked or surprised that it should be so.

Then had followed a period of travel, when the young widow had seen something of a wider world. Finally, Penelope had settled down to the life of which we know—still, when she was in London, seeing something of the gay, light-hearted circle of men and women who had once surrounded 'Perdita' with the pleasant and not insincere flattery they are ever ready

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to bestow on any and every human being who for the moment interests and amuses them. Mrs. Robinson had retained her place, as it were her niche, among them. They still delighted in 'Perdita's' beauty, and in her exceptional artistic gift; also—and she would have felt indeed angered and disgusted had she known it—her reputed wealth, which was by no means so great as was rumoured, played its part in keeping up her prestige with a world which is apt to become at times painfully aware of the value of money.

On the other hand, David Winfrith was not loved among these men and women who considered high living thoroughly compatible with—indeed, an almost indispensable adjunct to—high thinking. Winfrith took a grim pleasure in acting as kill-joy to certain kinds of human sport to which they were addicted, and, worse than that, he positively bored them! And so, when Mrs. Robinson, having drawn him once more into her innocent, but none the less dangerous, toils, had again formed with him an absorbing and intimate friendship, certain of her acquaintances were no longer as eager to be with her as they had once been, and they considered that their dear 'Perdita' was making herself slightly ridiculous.

Another reason why Mrs. Robinson found it impossible to divine how her mother would regard what she was now on the eve of doing, was because the younger woman knew well how her father would have regarded such a union as that which she was contemplating.

Lord Wantley had not been in the habit, as his wife had always been, of looking at life and those about him with charitable ambiguity; and there was no doubt as to how the great philanthropist, who had been in his lifetime a pillar of the Low Church party, regarded the slightest deviation from the moral law. Penelope now remembered with great discomfort

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and prevision of pain that concerning actual matters of life and conduct Lady Wantley's 'doxy' had always been, so far as she knew it, her husband's 'doxy.'

CHAPTER XII

' Ah! le bon chemin que le droit chemin! '

DÉROULÈDE.

I

KINGPOLE FARM was built at a time when loneliness was not feared, as it has come to be, by the poor and by the workers of rural England, and, if one can trust to outward signs, when country eyes were more alive than they are now to beauty of surroundings, and to the uplifting quality of wide, limitless expanses of land and sky.

Sir George Downing had now been there more than a week, a time of entire solitude, only broken by two long calls from David Winfrith. An old bedridden man and his widowed daughter were the only inmates of the farmhouse, and they troubled their lodger little. Accordingly, he had had plenty of time both to work and to think, and, during the long solitary walks which were his only recreation, he asked himself many searching questions compelling truthful answers.

Seeing Mrs. Robinson in her daily life at Monk's Eype had affected Downing with curious doubt and melancholy, and had given him his first feeling of uneasiness concerning their joint future. Till then he had not thought of her as the centre of a world, each member of which would be struck to the heart when they learnt what she was about to do. It was characteristic of the man that he gave no thought as to how the matter would affect himself. He con-

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ceived that each human being has a right to judge and decide for himself as to any given line of conduct, and he had long felt absolved from any personal duty as regarded his own wife. After their second parting he had offered her the entire freedom afforded by an American divorce, but she had refused to avail herself of it.

More, after leaving London, and before going to Monk's Eype, Downing had made a swift, secret journey to the place where he had learnt that Lady Downing was staying with some evangelical friends. The two had met in the parlour of a village inn, and each had been more amazed and moved than either would have thought possible by the physical changes time had wrought in the other.

With perhaps an unwise abruptness, he threw himself on her mercy, telling her the whole truth, and only concealing the name of the woman with whom he was about to form a new tie.

But Lady Downing had seen in his intention, in his proposed action, only an added reason for standing firm in the matter of a public divorce. She pointed out, in the gentle, reasonable tone which he felt was all that now remained of the Puritan girl he had once known, that Christian marriage is indissoluble. 'Your sin would be the same in either case,' she said; 'but if I consented to what you now desire, I should be a participant in your sin.'

As he had not told Penelope of his intention of seeking out his wife, there had been no reason to acquaint her with his failure.

But during those lonely days at Kingpole Farm Downing regretted, with bitter, voiceless lamentation, that he had failed in inducing his wife to consent to what would have so straightened the way before him. For the path which had seemed a few weeks before so clear and smooth, he now saw to be strewn with sharp stones and obstacles, which he knew

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would hurt and wound the creature he had come to love with so jealous and so absorbing a love, and who was about to give up so much for his sake.

II

On the afternoon of the tenth day of his stay at Kingpole Farm, and not long after he had seen the widowed daughter of his landlord go off for the afternoon to see one of her gossips at Burcombe, the little town which formed the only link between the farm and outer civilization, Sir George Downing, standing by the window of his sitting-room, suddenly saw the woman who now dwelt so constantly in his thoughts walking up the lonely road, and instinctively his eyes travelled past her, seeking the pony-cart and Cecily Wake.

But the rounded edges of the hill remained bare, and Downing looked at the advancing figure with longing eyes, with throbbing heart. It seemed an eternity since they two had been really alone together, free from probable interruption and from Mrs. Mote's suspicious, unfriendly eyes.

Turning quickly away, he walked with impatient steps up and down the old-fashioned farmhouse sitting-room, stifling the wish to go out and meet her, there, on the solitary road. But her coming had been unheralded. This was the first time she had come to him; hitherto it was always he who had gone to her, and he felt that even in the matter of moments she must choose that of their meeting.

Mrs. Robinson did not seem in any haste. Even when actually on her way up the prim flagged path, edged with wallflower, which led to the door of the farmhouse, she turned and looked long at the wonderful view spread out below the narrow ledge where wound the rough road above which she was standing.

Suddenly she put her hand to her breast; she had

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walked too quickly up the steep winding way from the hamlet where she had been compelled to leave her pony-cart; and as she stood, looking intently, with enraptured eyes, at the marvellous sight before her—for a great storm was gathering over the vast plain lying unrolled below—the man who watched her from the farmhouse windows likened her in his mind to Diana, weary for a moment of the chase.

Her tall figure was outlined against the lowering white and grey sky, the short dun-coloured skirt was blown about her knees by the high, stinging wind, while the closely buttoned jacket, reaching but just below the waist, revealed the exquisite arching lines of her shoulders and throat. Mercury, rather than Diana, was evoked by the winged, casque-like headgear which remained so firmly wedded, in spite of windy buffetings, to the broadly coiled hair.

Like all beautiful women who are also intelligent, Penelope's outward appearance—the very character of her beauty—changed and modified according to her mood. There were times when body was almost wholly subordinate to mind; days, again, when her physical loveliness had about it a mature, alluring quality, like to that of a ripe peach.

So perhaps had Downing envisaged her during those first days when he had been drawn out of his austere, watchful self by a charm Circe-like and compelling, when Mrs. Robinson had been engaged in the great feminine game at which she was so skilful a player—that of subduing a heart believed to be impregnable.

But her opponent himself had only caught fire, in any deep unchanging sense, when his Circe had suddenly revealed another and a very different side to her nature.

Just as an apparently trivial incident will often deflect the whole course of a human career, so, in the more complex and subtle life of the heart, a physical accident may quicken feeling into life, or destroy the

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nascent emotion. Downing had not been long at Polles Thermes when he fell ill from a return of the fever which often attacks Europeans in Persia, and Mrs. Robinson, after two long, dull days, during which she had been bereft of the stimulating presence of her new friend—or prey—took on herself the office, not so much of nurse as of secretary, to the lonely man.

It was then, when her mere presence had seemed to lift him out of a pit of deep physical depression, that Downing had found her to be a far more enduringly attractive woman than the brilliant, seductive figure who had appeared before him as a ripe delicious fruit, with which he had known well enough he must never slake his thirst. Her he could have left, and gone on his way, sighing that such Hesperidean apples were not for him. It was the softer, and, it must be said, the more intelligent and companionable, woman who received, during those days when she was simply kind, confidences concerning his present ambitions, and his schemes for benefiting the country with which he had now so many links, as well as that which had given him birth, and which was about to welcome him back, him the prodigal, with high honour.

Mrs. Robinson would have been surprised indeed had she known how much more it cost this friend she longed to turn into a lover to tell her of the present fame than of the far-away disgrace. When he revealed to her something of his hopes, of his plans, of what he intended to do when in England, it meant that she had conquered a side of Downing's nature which had been wholly starved since the great trouble which had ruined his youth—that which longed for human intimacy and confidence.

As he stood to-day looking at her from his window he felt a certain surprise. Never had he seen her look quite as she did now—so girlish, so virginal, so young, in spite of her thirty years of life. And truly Penelope's present outward appearance—that of

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embodied chastity — reflected, to quite a singular degree, her inward, instant mood. For, though this visit to Kingpole Farm had been the outcome of an intense longing to see Downing, and to be once more with him, she had yet feared that seeking him out like this might seem overbold. Still she had a good excuse, and one she could offer even to herself, namely, that all manner of material matters had to be settled between them, especially concerning her renouncement of the Robinson fortune.

And yet, had Penelope believed in omens, she would surely have turned back, for the few miles' drive had not been free of disagreeable incident.

First she had met the Winfriths, father and son, and she had been forced to allow them to believe a lie, for she could not tell them whither she was bound. Then, when some two miles from Kingpole Farm, and, fortunately, not far from a blacksmith's forge, had come a mishap to one of the wheels of her pony-cart, making further driving impossible, and so she had gone on up the steep hill on foot, feeling perhaps unreasonably ruffled and disturbed.

At last Downing saw her turn and walk up to the front-door. There was a pause, and then she came in through the open door of his room, and somewhat stiffly offered him her hand, still encased in a stout driving-glove.

So scrupulously did her host respect Mrs. Robinson's obvious wish to be treated as a stranger, that he even avoided looking into her face as they both instinctively walked over to where it was lightest—close to the curtainless open window.

Penelope had brought a packet of letters from Monk's Eype. 'I thought they might be important. Pray read them now,' she said.

Downing, eager to obey her, did so, while she, apparently absorbed in watching the flying storm-

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clouds scurrying over the broad valleys below, was yet intensely conscious of his presence, and of how strangely young he looked to-day—how straight, how lean, how strong, how much more a man, in the same sense that David Winfrith was a man, than he had appeared to be at Monk's Eype, pitted against the shadowless youth of Cecily Wake, and even of Wantley.

Suddenly, having slightly turned her head, thinking to see Downing without appearing to do so, Penelope became aware that he was watching her with a melancholy, intense look.

Her heart began to beat unaccountably fast. She turned away hurriedly, and again looked out over the vast panorama of land and sky lying unrolled before them. Then she began talking quickly, and not very coherently, of the matters about which she had come to consult him. Had he anything to suggest, for instance, concerning the money arrangements which must now be made about the Melancthon Settlement?

‘The Melancthon Settlement?’

Downing concentrated his mind on the problems now confronting his companion. He rose suddenly to look for a book of reference which he knew contained details of the working of similar philanthropic schemes, and which he had procured when in London. But Mrs. Robinson also sprang to her feet, and with a nervous gesture put her hand on the back of her chair.

She watched his coming and going, and when he brought back the book, and handed her a pencil and some sheets of paper, she again sat down.

But a grim look had come over Downing's face. He came and stood by her, for the first time that day he touched her, and she felt the weight of his hand on her shoulder as he said quietly: ‘Are you afraid of me, Penelope?’

She looked up quickly, furtively. How strange to hear him thus pronounce her name! Like that Prince

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and Princess in the French fairy tale, who only called each other *mon cœur* and *ma mie*, such familiarities as 'George' and 'Penelope' had not yet been theirs.

'Oh no!' she cried, and inconsequently added: 'I only thought that you might consider my coming here to-day odd, uncalled for——'

But actions speak louder than words. Downing felt cut to the heart. He knew that he had deserved better things of her than that she should leap to her feet in fear if he did but move. But as he turned away, perplexed and angered, Mrs. Robinson was bent on showing her repentance. She came near to him, and even took his hand. 'I have been so unhappy,' she said simply, 'since you went away. Believe me, I am only content when we are together.'

Downing still looked at her with troubled eyes.

Drawing his hand out of hers, he set himself to discuss the various business arrangements connected with her renouncement of the great fortune she was giving up for the sake of his good name and repute; and, listening to all he had to say, Penelope was impressed by his conscientiousness, by his feeling that she would of course feel bound to see that no portion of the large sum in question should slip into unworthy hands.

'I am sure,' he said at last, 'that your friend Mr. Winfrith will advise better than I, in my ignorance of the actual working of the Melancthon Settlement, can hope to do.' He unfortunately added: 'Since I have seen him, I have wondered whether he will stand our friend?'

Mrs. Robinson looked up quickly. 'No,' she answered very deliberately, and Downing thought her oddly indifferent. 'I do not think David Winfrith will have the slightest sympathy with me—with us. He is exceedingly conventional.'

All at once a discussion, provoked by her, seemed

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to make the future intimately near, especially to the man who suddenly found himself answering questions, some childish and very frank in their expression, about the life led by Europeans in Persia. Penelope, for the moment, seemed to be looking forward to their joint existence as to a series of exciting and romantic adventures.

‘Boxes not too large to go on mules? I thought camels always carried one’s luggage!’ There was a touch of disappointment in her voice, but before he could answer with the promise that she should have camels and to spare—in fact, anything and everything she wanted, she had added: ‘Two good English saddles,’ and made a pencil note.

‘Nay, I will see to that!’ said Downing quickly.

Some of her questions were difficult to answer, for the questioner seemed to forget—and, seeing this, Downing’s heart grew heavy within him—that her position among the other women of her own kind and race out there would be one full of ambiguity.

Not even his great power, the fear with which he was regarded, could save her, were she to put herself in the way of it, from miserable and petty insult.

Hastily he turned the talk to his own house in Teheran. He had made no attempt, as do so many Europeans, to alter the essentially Persian character of his dwelling, and he lingered over the description of his beautiful garden, fragrant with roses and violets, traversed by flowing rivulets, cooled by leaping fountains. Penelope’s face darkened when a word was said concerning Mrs. Mote, or, rather, of the native badgee, or ayah, who would, for a while at least, take her old nurse’s place. ‘I am sure,’ said he, rather awkwardly, ‘that in time you will want an English maid, especially at Laar’; and then he told her, not for the first time, of the life they would lead when summer came, in tents, Persian fashion, far above the pleasant hill villages, always avoided by

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Downing, where the British, Russian, and French colonies have their gossip-haunted retreats near the city.

The thought of her old nurse reminded Mrs. Robinson that it was growing late. She explained that at Burcombe she would be able to hire some kind of conveyance to take her back to Monk's Eype, and as she watched Downing preparing for the two-mile walk, she said solicitously: 'I wonder if I ought to let you come with me? The rain may keep off till we get down there, but you may have a terribly wet walk back, and, if you fall ill here, I cannot come and be with you as I was at Pol les Thermes.'

As she spoke she looked at him, and her look, even more than her words, moved Downing as a man is wont to be moved when the woman he loves becomes suddenly and unexpectedly tender. 'Is it likely that I should let you go alone?' he said, rather gruffly. 'You told me once you are afraid of thunder. Well, I think we are going to have thunder, and very soon.'

But now his visitor seemed in no hurry to leave the curious, rather dark room, with its old-fashioned furnishings. 'I wonder when we shall meet again,' she said a little plaintively.

But Downing made no answer. Instead, he flung open the door, preceded her down the darkened passage, and then, or so it seemed to Penelope, almost thrust her out on to the flagged path.

Why this great haste, this sudden hurry to be quit of the farmhouse? As yet there was no rain, and doubtless the high wind would keep off the storm till night. In the last hour—nay, it was not even an hour since she had felt the weight of Downing's hand laid in reproach on her shoulder—her mood had, indeed changed. Mrs. Robinson had been reluctant to come in, but now she was very loth to go.

There came a time in Penelope's life when every

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feeling she had ever possessed for Downing—and, looking back, she had to tell herself that she had loved him with every kind of love a woman may give a man—became merged in boundless and awed gratitude, and when her thoughts would especially single out this storm-driven afternoon and evening. But now Mrs. Robinson felt aggrieved by his reserve, surprised at his coldness, and, standing there on the flagged path, waiting while her companion spent what seemed to her much unnecessary time in securely fastening the door behind them, she felt very sore, and inclined to linger unduly.

And so, as he came quickly towards her, Downing saw a curious look on her face that caused his own expression suddenly to change. A light leapt into his grey eyes, but Mrs. Robinson had turned pettishly away. 'I must stop a moment,' she said; 'the laces of my shoe have come untied.'

The wind was rising swirling clouds of dust below, but Downing caught her words, and understood the mingled feelings which had prompted their utterance. Quickly passing her, he knelt on the lowest of the steps which led from the flagged path to the road, tied her shoe-laces, and then, after glancing up and down the deserted road, he bent over and kissed lingeringly, first one and then the other, of the wearer's feet.

Then he sprang up, and, for a moment, he looked at her deprecatingly, but Penelope, mollified by what she took to be an act of unwonted humility and homage, laughed and blushed as she let him put her hand through his arm.

They walked down the hill in silence. The wind was still rising, large drops of rain began to fall at intervals, and yet, for the first time that afternoon, Mrs. Robinson felt wholly content. There was something in her nature which responded to wild weather, and, but for the lateness of the hour, she

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would have liked so to make her way through wind and beating rain back to Monk's Eype.

At last they found themselves on a level, monotonous stretch of road. To the right, rising beyond a piece of rough, untilled ground, in the centre of which stood a grove of high trees, lay the straggling little town of Burcombe, and Mrs. Robinson looked doubtfully at the long, rain-flecked road before them. 'If we make our way across, and go through the grounds of Burcombe Abbey,' she said, indicating the grove of trees, 'we should get to the town far sooner than by going round this way. I think the place is let this summer, but if the storm becomes worse, we might take shelter in one of the out-buildings, and send some one for a carriage.'

The first flash of lightning, the first real rush of rain, hastened their decision. Downing looked down with a feeling of exultation at his companion; her face was bent before the wind, but her voice was full of strength and a certain joyous cheer. Still, when the lightning lit up for a moment the lonely expanse of brown heath and rough ground about them, he felt her involuntary shudder, and she held closer to him.

Soon they had passed through a broken palisade into the comparative shelter afforded by the high trees which surrounded and embowered the remains of what had once been a famous Cistercian monastery. It was good to be out of the storm, under one of the arched avenues which bordered a straight dark pool, covered with still duck-weed, stretching before them.

As yet the rain had not had time to penetrate the canopy of green leaves shutting out the grey sky, but the path along which Downing was hurrying Penelope was already strewn with branches, some of dangerous size, and, had he not held her strongly, more than once she would have slipped and fallen. He saw that their wisest course would be to return to

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the open ground they had left, but the knowledge that some kind of shelter lay before them, if they could only reach it safely, made him keep the thought to himself.

If—if indeed! For there came a sudden rending, as it were, of earth and water, an awful blinding flash; and then—in the interval between the lightning and the crash of thunder—one of the tall trees on the opposite side of the now rain-swept water fell with a heavy thud right across the pool, its green apex settling down but a few yards in front of the wayfarers.

With a wholly instinctive gesture Downing flung both arms round his companion, and in the face of each the other read the unspoken, anguished question, 'Is this, then, to be the end, the solution, of our strange romance, of our difficult problem?' But Mrs. Robinson shook her head, with a sudden gesture signifying no surrender, and they pushed blindly on, treading on and over the wood and leaves carpeting the way before them.

The avenue ended abruptly with a flight of steps cut in the steep green bank of what at first Downing took to be another deep pool, dark with weeds and studded with strange rocks. So vivid was this impression that he stayed his own and Penelope's feet, while his eyes sought for a way round to a curious building, not unlike the remains of an old mill, which he saw opposite, and which promised the looked-for shelter.

But gradually, as his eyes grew more accustomed to the twilight, he saw that what he had taken for a sheet of still water was a stretch of grass, smooth as a bowling-green, from which rose jagged pillars, and uncouth, green-draped ruins, portions of the foundations of the old abbey, while to the right, bordered by gaunt trees, a bare space surrounded by low walls showed the site of what had been a vast medieval church.

The two, standing there, were struck by the look

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of dreadful desolation presented by the scene, the more desolate, the more God-forsaken, by reason of the fantastic-looking house which stood the other side of the deep depression containing the abbey ruins. Silently, no longer arm in arm, they went down the green steps, and made their way through what had been the cells and spacious chambers, the guest-rooms and the broad refectory, of the great monastery.

III

Mrs. Robinson and Downing had sheltered but a moment in the porch of the old-fashioned house, which doubtless incorporated some portion of the monastic buildings, when the heavy, nail-studded door suddenly opened, revealing a roomy vaulted hall.

An old man, evidently a self-respecting and respected butler, stood peering out into the semi-darkness, and as he did so invited them rather crossly to come in.

Mrs. Robinson stepped back into the wind and rain, for she felt in no mood to confront a stranger. But the man repeated with some asperity: 'You are, please, to come in. Those are my mistress's orders. Now, don't be keeping me in this draught!'

At last, very reluctantly, they accepted his rather tart invitation, but when they stood side by side in the lamplight before him, the old manservant's tone altered at once. 'I beg your pardon, sir, but we do get such tramps about here, and my mistress, she's that kind! One of the maids saw you and the lady just after we thought one of the ruins had been struck by lightning——'

'I think the storm is dying down. If we may sit here in the hall for a few moments, I am sure we could then go on quite well.' Mrs. Robinson spoke with a touch of impatience. She felt greatly annoyed, and looked at Downing imploringly. Surely he must

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realize how unpleasant it would be if she were suddenly brought face to face with some London acquaintance. But Downing seemed for the moment to have no thought of her: he stood looking fixedly at the old man, trying to remember if he could ever have been here before. The atmosphere of the house, even the butler's impassive face, seemed familiar; but since he had been in England his memory had played him many queer tricks.

He sighed heavily, and the words Penelope had uttered a few moments before at last penetrated his brain. 'Yes,' he said, rousing himself, 'the storm is passing by, and we must go on to Burcombe without delay.'

'But my mistress particularly wished to speak to *whoever* it was, sir.' The man spoke urgently.

'This is intolerable,' muttered Penelope; then aloud: 'But we are neither of us fit to be seen by anybody. I am sure your mistress will excuse us.'

'My mistress will not *see* you, ma'am'—the old man's tone was a rebuke—'for she is blind.'

He did not wait to hear any more objections, but turning, suddenly opened a door on his right.

Penelope shrugged her shoulders. What an unsatisfactory, odious day this had been! But even so she motioned Downing to take off his old rain-sodden cloak, anxious that he at least should look well before this strange woman. Ah! but she was blind!

The door which the old man had just opened, and as he thought carefully closed, swung back, and the two standing outside saw into a pretty room, of which the uneven oak floor was sunk below the level of the hall. They heard, with some discomfort, the murmur of voices, and then the words, uttered in the clear, rather mincing intonation affected by a certain type of old-fashioned servant: 'But I'm quite positive that it is, ma'am. The minute the gentleman stepped

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in with the young lady I said to myself, "Why, surely this is our Mr. Downing!" When he went away I'd already been some years in Mr. Delacour's service, ma'am, and of course I knew him quite well. I don't say he's not changed——'

But as Penelope was looking for a way of escape, if not for Downing, then most certainly for herself, the open door of the bright, gay little sitting-room suddenly framed a slight, almost shadowy, figure of which even Mrs. Robinson, standing there at bay, felt the disarming, pathetic charm.

There is often about a blind woman, especially about one who was not born blind, a ghost-like serenity of manner, and even of appearance.

Mrs. Delacour's voice still had its soothing, rather anxious quality, but she spoke with restraint and dignified simplicity to the two strangers, concerning one of whom she had just been told such an amazing, and to her most moving, fact. 'Will you come in and rest?' she said; 'I fear you must have gone through a terrible experience.'

As they were entering the room, Downing suddenly stumbled—he always so adroit, so easy in his movements—and Penelope, herself no longer afraid, but feeling curiously soothed and comforted in this quiet, gentle atmosphere, saw that he was terribly moved, his face ravaged with contending feelings to which she had no clue. She looked away quickly, but Downing seemed unaware of her presence, incapable of speaking.

The two women talked together. Mrs. Robinson told of the tree struck by lightning, of their danger, and still Downing did not, could not, speak.

'Tell me,' said Mrs. Delacour at last—and her voice, in spite of her determination, of her prayer, that it should not be so, trembled a little—'is it true that George Downing is here? We once had a friend, a very dear friend, of that name, and my old servant is

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convinced that it was he who came in just now out of the storm.'

Again there was silence. Mrs. Robinson looked at him reproachfully. Why did he keep this gentle, kindly woman in suspense? Could it be for her, Penelope's sake? But Downing suddenly held up his hand; he did not wish the answer to come from any lips but his own—'Yes,' he said hoarsely, 'I am George Downing, come back, as you said I should come back, Mrs. Delacour!'

And then, or so it appeared to Penelope, a strange desire seized the other two to make her go away, to leave them to themselves. No word was said revealing Mrs. Robinson's identity, but there was a question of the long drive to Wyke Regis. Mrs. Delacour offered her carriage, Downing went to order it, and so for a moment the other two were left alone together. Penelope tried to speak indifferently, but failed; she felt a wild, an unreasoning jealousy of this sightless, white-haired woman with whom she was leaving the man she loved.

Did Mrs. Delacour, with the strange prescience of the blind, divine something of what was passing in the other's mind? All she said was, 'Mr. Downing—or is it not Sir George now?—was with my husband, one of his younger colleagues, at the Foreign Office, and we saw him constantly. I fear this meeting must recall to him many painful circumstances.'

A moment later, as Downing was putting her into the carriage, unmindful of the old man standing just inside the hall, Penelope drew him with her into the darkness: 'Say that you love me!' she whispered, and he felt her tears on his lips; 'say that you cannot bear to let me go!'

And then she was comforted, for 'Shall I come with you?' he asked urgently, no lack of longing now in his low, deep voice; 'let me go back and tell her that I cannot let you go alone!'

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But again Penelope felt suddenly afraid—of herself, perhaps, rather than of him. 'No, no!' she said hurriedly; 'it would be wrong, unkind, to your old friend—to Mrs. Delacour.'

CHAPTER XIII

'But there's one happy moment when the mind
Is left unguarded, waiting to be kind,
Which the wise lover understanding right,
Steals in like day upon the wings of light.'

I

THE absence of Mrs. Robinson from the villa, even for only a few hours, afforded a curious relief, a distinct lightening of the atmosphere, to all those—if one important exception be made, that of Mrs. Mote—whom she had left at Monk's Eype on the afternoon of her expedition to Kingpole Farm.

Penelope's inquietude of mind had gradually affected all her guests. Even her mother, the person of whom she saw least, had become dimly aware that all was not as it should be, and, while not in any way as yet connecting her daughter with Sir George Downing, she regarded him as an evil and alien influence.

Lady Wantley had taken an intuitive, unreasoning dislike to the remarkable man whose presence she realized her daughter would have wished her to regard as an honour; and though she was quite unaware of it, a word ventured by Mrs. Mote very early in Downing's stay at Monk's Eype had contributed to this feeling of discomfort and suspicion.

Like most gifts, that of intuition can be cultivated, and Lady Wantley had done all in her power to increase and fructify that side of her nature. The mere

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presence of Downing in the same room with herself made her feel as if she was suddenly thrust amid warring elements, and her mind became shadowed by the suspicion that this man, when a dweller in the Eastern country famed immemorially for the potency of its magic, had foregathered with spirits of evil. That his going had not lifted the clouds which seemed to hang so darkly over the whole of the little company about her, Lady Wantley regarded as a proof that her suspicions were well founded, for to her thinking it is far easier to evoke than to lay demoniac influences.

These thoughts, however, she kept to herself, and no knowledge that in her mother Downing had a watchful antagonist came to increase Mrs. Robinson's nervous unrest.

During those same days following Downing's departure from Monk's Eype, Mrs. Robinson and Wantley left off sparring, and Penelope would debate uneasily whether it was his own affairs—or hers—which had so much altered her cousin's manner, and made him become, to herself, more kindly and considerate than she had ever before known him. But the young man kept his own counsel. He and old Miss Wake never referred to the conversation they had held the day Penelope and Cecily had driven over to Shagisham; each, however, was aware that the other had felt relieved, perhaps unreasonably so, to see Persian Downing leave Monk's Eype.

Sometimes Wantley was inclined to think that Miss Wake had been utterly misled, and then, again, some trifling circumstance would make him fear that she had been right.

The doubt was sufficiently strong to convince him that this was no moment to speak—upon another matter—to Cecily Wake: In London, amid the impersonal surroundings of the Melancthon Settlement, he would pursue and bring to a happy ending—

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nay, to an exquisite beginning—his and Cecily's simple romance. But in the meanwhile he saw no reason for denying himself the happiness of being with her every moment of the day not given up by her to Penelope.

Once, when they were thus together, Cecily had said a word—only a word, and in defence of a toy fund organized by a great London newspaper—concerning her own giftless childhood and girlhood.

There had been no kind relatives or friends to remember the convent-bred child. Miss Wake's Christmas present had always been something useful and, indeed, necessary, and Cecily, remembering, pleaded for the useless doll and the unnecessary toy.

Wantley, while pretending to be only half-convinced, was composing in his own mind a letter to the old servant who kept for him his few family relics, his father's books, his mother's lace and simple jewels. Even now, or so he told himself, the girl walking by his side, talking with the youthful energy and certainty of being right which always both amused and moved him, was herself sufficiently a child to enjoy a gift, especially an anonymous gift, by post.

And this was why the young man, usually so ready to grumble at the inscrutable ways of Providence, hailed his cousin's departure, for what she had announced would be a long afternoon's expedition, as a piece of amazing good fortune.

Each day a man rode over from the villa to Wyke Regis to fetch the contents of the second post, and to-day the letters had come, by Mrs. Robinson's orders, rather earlier than usual. Wantley lingered about in the hall while the bag was being opened by Penelope. There were several letters addressed to Downing, and these he saw, with a slight pang, were quickly put aside with Penelope's own. Two parcels,

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both small, both oblong in shape, were addressed in an uneducated handwriting to 'Miss Cecily Wake,' and, puzzled, he peered down at them curiously.

Then Wantley watched his cousin start off on her lonely way, while she noted, with discomfort, that he asked no questions as to her destination. The hour that followed was spent by him in walking up and down the terrace, in reading the day's paper, which he thought had never been so empty of interesting news, and in wondering why Cicely did not come downstairs. He also asked himself, with some anxiety, what there could possibly be in the second parcel that had arrived for her that day. He thought he knew all about the contents of the first, and it seemed odd that on the same day there should have come two. . . .

At last a happy inspiration led him to the studio, and there he found the girl sitting, various of her treasures—for, like a child, she was fond of bearing about with her her favourite possessions—spread out on Penelope's painting-table.

Physical delicacy is too often associated in people's minds with goodness, but, as a matter of fact, to be good in anything but a very passive sense almost always requires the possession of health. It was because Cecily Wake had brought from her convent school unbroken strength of body, and a mind which had never concerned itself with any of the more painful problems of life, that she proved so valuable a helper to Mr. Hammond and Mrs. Pomfret. Thanks to her perfect physical condition, she was always ready to start off, at a moment's notice, on the most tiring and the most dispiriting expeditions. Her feet seemed never weary, her brain never exhausted, and, though she was sometimes disappointed when things went wrong, she was always ready to start again with unabated vigour to try and set them right.

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To Cecily Wake heaven and hell, the world and purgatory, were all equally real, matter of fact, and to be accepted without question. She knew nothing of the hell which people may make for themselves, and only now, since she had been at Monk's Eype, had she realized that it is possible to find a very fair imitation of heaven on this earth.

Cecily's hell was very sparsely peopled, and that entirely with historical characters. As to those who fill the dread place, they were, to her thinking, an ill-sorted company, and probably very few of those about her, while believing the numbers to be much greater, would have included those whom she believed to be there. Judas, Henry VIII., the man who tortured the little Dauphin in the Temple, the Bishop who condemned Joan of Arc to be burnt—they, she thought, must surely all be there. But, as regarded the world about her, Cecily was quite convinced that, like William of Deloraine, 'Between the saddle and the ground, they mercy sought and mercy found.'

This little analysis of Cecily Wake's character and point of view is necessary to explain one of the two gifts which had come to her by the second post—that with which Wantley had not only had nothing to do, but which had caused him some searching of heart, for he had been afraid that it might be the outcome of one of those misunderstandings, those misreadings of orders, which affect and annoy men so much more than women.

But the girl knew quite well from whom had come the six woolwork table-napkin rings, although the only indication of the sender had been the words, written on a piece of common note-paper—

' This is from a friend
Who loves you no end.'

She required no signature to tell her that the sender was a certain Charlotte Pidder, with whom, more than

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a year before, Cecily, for a few days, had been thrown into the most intimate, and it might be said affectionate, contact.

I am writing of a time when there was but one half-penny evening paper in London, and when original, or even unusual, contributions were regarded askance by editors. To the office of that paper came one day a most remarkable letter, setting forth the sad case of a Cornish girl who, having come up to London, and having there met with what the poor, with their apt turn for language, term a 'misfortune,' had found it impossible thenceforward to make an honest living. The writer explained very simply his efforts on her behalf, but added that his resources had come to an end, and that the mere fact that he was a man much in her own class of life made those whom he sought to interest in her case look on him, as well as on her, with suspicion. The editor of the evening paper sent for the writer, convinced himself of the truth of his story, and then printed the letter.

The effect of its publication was instantaneous and extraordinary. To that newspaper office letters poured in from all parts of the country, some of the writers simply offering money, others expressing themselves as willing to adopt the girl, while many were anxious to give her work at a reasonable wage. These last were regarded by both the editor and the girl's workman friend as being alone worthy of consideration.

Then came the difficult question of how a choice among these would-be employers was to be made, and the editor bethought himself of the Melancthon Settlement. Very soon he had laid upon Mrs. Pomfret the whole responsibility of how and where fortunate Charlotte Pidder should find a home. Together Philip Hammond, Cecily Wake, and Mrs. Pomfret looked over the letters. They finally weeded out twelve for further consideration, and the interchange

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of further letters brought the number down to four.

To the one who appeared to be the most sensible of these generous folk, Mrs. Pomfret despatched Charlotte Pidder, only to have her sent back the next day with a curt note to the effect that the good Samaritan could not think of taking into her service a girl whose hair was short and curly like a man's! This experience taught wisdom to the three people on whom Charlotte's fate depended, and so it was decided that, before the girl was sent off to another would-be benefactor, Cecily Wake should go and spy out, as it were, the hospitable land.

This is no place to tell the tale of Cecily's experiences, some grotesque and some sinister. Soon a day came when she and Mrs. Pomfret were compelled to look over again the letters which they had at first rejected, and finally after a long journey by train and tram to a comparatively poor neighbourhood, Cecily found two human beings, good, simple-hearted, tender-minded folk, with whom there seemed some hope that Charlotte Pidder would find a peaceful haven, and work her way back to self-respect and some measure of happiness. It was arranged that her 'days out' should be spent at the Settlement, and she formed a deep, dumb attachment to the girl, only a year or two older than herself, whom she had seen take so much trouble on her behalf, and who had treated her during those anxious days with such kindly, unforced sympathy and consideration.

These napkin-rings, with their red and blue pattern worked in Berlin wool, represented many hours of toil, and Cecily, knowing this, was meditating a letter of warm thanks to the sender, when Wantley walked into the studio and looked questioningly at the table. At once he saw the sheet of paper with its rudely-written lines. He looked quickly at the girl, and then remarked: 'Victor Hugo once said that every

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kind of emotion could be expressed in doggerel, and now I am inclined to think he was right. But I like the poetry better than the present.'

Cecily covered the poor little cardboard box with a sudden protective gesture. 'I like them very much,' she said stoutly. 'The person who made them for me has very little spare time, and it was very good of her to take so much trouble. But I have had another present to-day—one you will like better.'

Wantley's hand went up to his mouth; he even reddened slightly. But Cecily was not looking at him. Her hands were busy with the old-fashioned fastening of a flat red-leather case. At last the little brass hook slipped back, she lifted the lid, and there, lying on a faded white satin pad, lay two rows of finely matched, though not very large, pearls.

The sight affected the two looking down at them very differently. To Wantley the little red case brought back a rush of memories. He saw himself again a little boy, standing by his pretty, fair mother's dressing-table, sometimes allowed as a great treat to fasten the quaint diamond clasp round the slender neck. Cecily simply flushed with pleasure, and she felt full of gratitude to the kind giver, about whose identity she felt no doubt.

'Only the other day,' she said, smiling, 'Penelope noticed that I had no necklace, nothing to wear in the evening—and now you see what she has had sent me!'

'Penelope? Then, do you think these pearls are a gift from my cousin?'

'Of course they are! Who else would think of giving me anything of the kind?'

'Cannot you imagine any other'—Wantley's voice shook a little in spite of himself—'any other person who might wish to give you pleasure?'

Cecily looked up puzzled. He came round and stood by the table on which lay the two gifts received by her that day. Very deliberately he took up one of

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Mrs. Robinson's soft lead-pencils, and then wrote across a torn piece of drawing-paper,

' This is from a lover
Who will love you for ever,'

and laid it down so that it covered the pearls. ' You see,' he said, ' this is not, as was the other gift to-day, friendship's offering. But, still, the words I have written there are meant quite as sincerely. These pearls belonged to my mother. They were given to her by my father on the first anniversary of their wedding-day, and I know how happy it would have made her—have made them both—to think that you would wear them.'

He spoke quickly, and yet after the first moment, with great gravity. As Cecily made no answer, he added: ' You will not refuse to take them from me? '

II

The old nurse had watched Penelope drive off alone that afternoon with deep misgiving and fear, for she was quite sure that her mistress was bound for King-pole Farm.

Motey had soon become aware that Mrs. Robinson received no letters from Downing, and this, to a mind sharpened by jealousy and semi-maternal instinct, only the more indicated the closeness and the thorough understanding between them, and showed, or so the maid believed, that all their plans as to the future were already arranged.

Again and again she had been on the point of attacking her mistress, of asking Penelope to confirm or to deny her suspicions, and many a night, while lying awake listening through the closed door to Mrs. Robinson's restless movements, always aware when her nursling was not asleep, Mrs. Mote would make up long homely phrases in which to formulate her appeal. But when daylight came, when she

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found herself face to face with Penelope, her courage ebbed away, and she became afraid—for herself.

What if anything said by her provoked a sudden separation from her mistress? More than once in the last ten years Motey and Mrs. Robinson had come to moments of sudden warfare, when the younger woman's affection for her old nurse had been sorely tried, and yet on those occasions, as Mrs. Mote was only too well aware, no feeling even approaching that which now bound Penelope to Sir George Downing had been in question.

Sometimes the old woman told herself that she was a fool, and that her terrors were vain terrors, for the actual proofs of what she feared was about to happen were few.

Again and again, during Mrs. Robinson's brief absences from the villa, Motey had sought to find—what?

She hardly knew.

Never had Penelope, careless as she had always been hitherto of such things, left one of Downing's letters about in her room, or, forgotten, in a pocket. In the matter of her searching, the old nurse was troubled by no scruples. She would have smiled grimly had some accident made known to her how some of the people about her would have regarded this turning out of pockets, this trying of locked places with stray keys.

Poor Motey! She felt like a mother whose child has been given a packet of poisoned sweets, and who knows that they must be found at all costs before evil befalls. But so far her unscrupulous seeking had yielded little or nothing to confirm what she was fast coming to believe an absolute certainty—namely, that Penelope was on the eve of forming with Downing what both intended should be a lifelong tie.

Many little incidents, deepening this conviction, crowded on her day by day, as it grew increasingly

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clear that Mrs. Robinson was silently preparing for some great change in her life. The maid marvelled at the blindness of Penelope's mother, of Wantley, even of Cecily Wake—how could they help noting that Penelope never now spoke of the future, that she made no plans, as she was so fond of doing, for the coming winter?

Then, late in the afternoon which saw Mrs. Robinson at Kingpole Farm, Motey at last found something which provided, to her mind, undoubted proof. This was a formal business letter from a great London firm, celebrated for the perfection of its Eastern outfits, and it contained answers to a number of questions evidently written by one contemplating a long sojourn in Teheran.

Penelope, before starting out that afternoon, had shown considerable annoyance at having mislaid a paper she wished to take with her. She had made no secret of the fact, and both she and Motey had searched for the envelope all over the large room. After her mistress had left, Mrs. Mote had continued the search, and she had at last found this letter, laid under some gloves which Penelope had at first intended to take, but had rejected in favour of a thicker pair.

The maid carried off this, to her, most sinister sheet of paper into her own room, and as the evening closed in, and Penelope did not come back, she saw in it, or rather in her mistress's desire to take it with her that day, an indication that perhaps Mrs. Robinson had gone, not intending to return, and that she might be at this very moment on her way, and not alone, to London.

III

Suspense has been described as the most terrible of the many agonies the human heart and mind are so often called upon to endure.

Mrs. Mote, sitting in the twilight watching the

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gathering storm, listening in vain for the soft rumble of the little pony-cart, felt as if actual knowledge that what she feared had happened would be preferable to this anxiety.

More than once she got up and stood by one of the long narrow windows in the broad passage which commanded a view of the winding road, cut through the down, on which Penelope, if she ever came back, must appear. But Mrs. Mote was in no mood to pass the time of day with the upper housemaid, who would soon be coming to light the tall argand lamp in the corridor, and so at last she retreated into her room, there to remain in still wretchedness, convinced that Penelope had indeed gone, though her ears still remained painfully alive to the slightest sound which might give the lie to her dread.

It was eight o'clock. Already someone, probably Wantley, had ordered dinner to be put back half an hour, when the deep, soft-toned dressing-bell rang in the hall.

The maid listened dully to the comings to and fro up and down the staircase; there was an interval of silence; and then the door of her room suddenly opened, and Lady Wantley's tall figure was outlined for a moment against the dim patch of light afforded by the corridor window opposite.

'Surely your mistress did not intend to stay out so late to-night?' The voice was full of misgiving and agitation.

The old servant stood up; a curious instinct of loyalty to Mrs. Robinson seemed to impel her to say no word of her great fear. And yet she felt it not fair that Lady Wantley should be left in complete ignorance of what, if she, the old nurse, were right, would soon be known to the whole household.

'Perhaps my mistress is not coming back to-night; perhaps she intended to go on to London from Kingpole Farm,' she said in a curious, hesitating tone.

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'From Kingpole Farm?' Lady Wantley advanced into the room. She turned and closed the door into the passage, and then seemed to tower above the stout little woman who stood before her in the twilight.

Mrs. Mote had taken up a corner of the black apron she always wore, and she was twisting it up and down in her fingers, remaining silent the while.

'Motey, what do you mean?' Lady Wantley spoke with a touch of haughty decision in her voice.

'What led you to suppose for a moment that my daughter has gone to Kingpole Farm? That, surely, is where Sir George Downing is staying!'

Then Mrs. Mote lost her head. She was spent with trouble, sick with suspense, and exasperated by Lady Wantley's clearly-conveyed rebuke. After all, Penelope was as dear—ay, perhaps dearer—to herself, the nurse, as to the mother who had had so little of the real trouble entailed by the rearing of her child. Was it likely that she, Motey, would say anything reflecting on the creature whom she loved so well, for whose honour she had often shown herself far more jealous than Lady Wantley had seemed to be, and whom she had saved, or so she firmly believed, from so many pitfalls?

'What made me think of it?' she repeated violently. 'Why, I *know* she's there! She wasn't likely to keep away any longer! Oh, my lady, how is it you've not seen, that you haven't come to understand, how it is with her? I should have thought that anyone who cared for her, and who isn't blind, must surely know, know that——'

Mrs. Mote's voice fell almost to a whisper as she added, throwing out her hands: 'She *do* like him; it's no good my saying anything else! Why didn't his lordship let her have Master David? He was the one for her; she's never liked anyone so well till just now.'

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Then the speaker turned and nervously struck a match, lighting one of two tall candles standing on the chest of drawers behind her.

Lady Wantley's face looked very grey and drawn in the yellow light, but it was set in stern lines. 'Hush!' she said: 'you forget yourself, Motey; and you are making a great mistake. If you refer to Sir George Downing'—she brought out the name with a certain effort—'you cannot be aware of what is known quite well to your mistress, for she herself told me that he is married. His wife, who is an American lady, once came to see your master.'

There was a long silence. Lady Wantley was waiting for the other to make some sign of submission, but the old servant only gave the woman who had been for so many years her own mistress a quick, furtive look, full of mingled pity and contempt, of fierce personal distress and impatience.

'Were they together then?' she said at last, and with apparent inconsequence she added; 'Does your ladyship remember Mrs. Winfrith, and what happened to her?'

Lady Wantley deigned no answer to Motey's questions. 'I know that you love my daughter,' she said slowly, almost reluctantly; but the servant, with a quick movement, shrank back, and her look, her gesture, forbade the other—the more fortunate woman who had borne the child Motey loved so well—to intrude on the nurse's relation to that child.

'Love her!' Motey was repeating to herself, though no words passed her lips, 'why, I'd give my body and soul for her, which is more than you would do!' But Mrs. Mote mis-estimated the mother-instinct in the woman who was now standing opposite to her.

Then, quickly, vehemently, the old nurse told of what she knew and what she feared with so great a dread, and the story which Lady Wantley heard, still standing, in dead silence, though it might have seemed

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very unconvincing to a lawyer, brought absolute conviction to Penelope's mother.

She was told in Motey's rough, expressive words of that first meeting in the great Paris station, when Mrs. Robinson, as if hypnotized by this singular-looking man, then a complete stranger, had accepted from him a real service, thus opening the door to an acquaintance which, with scarce any interval, had ripened into an absorbing passion. The maid recalled her own dawning suspicions, her powerlessness to stay the feeling which had seemed suddenly to overpower her mistress, her vain attempts to persuade Penelope to leave Pol les Thermes. Then the silent listener heard of the journey back, with Downing in close attendance, of Mrs. Mote's hope that this was the end of the affair, finally of the nurse's dismay when she discovered that he was actually coming to Monk's Eype.

The story the more impressed Lady Wantley because it was the first time she had received such confidences. She did not know, and Mrs. Mote saw no reason to enlighten her, that Penelope had always been fond of passing adventure, and she would have been astonished indeed had she known that, just at first, her daughter's vigilant companion had troubled but little about her mistress and Sir George Downing. Mrs. Mote had so often seen Penelope come forth, apparently unscathed, from romantic encounters, from long sentimental duels, in which the woman had always been an easy victor.

At last the nurse had said all there was to say. She had even shown Lady Wantley the letter which she regarded as such absolute evidence of what she feared, when again the door suddenly opened, and the two within the room started, or so it seemed to themselves, guiltily apart, as Mrs. Robinson, travel-stained and weary, and yet scarcely dishevelled, and with a bright colour in her cheeks, stood before them.

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'I had an accident,' she said, rather breathlessly. 'The left wheel came off the pony-cart. That made me late, the more so that I was caught in the great storm which you do not seem to have had here.'

As she spoke she was glancing sharply from her mother to her maid. 'Were you afraid? I fear you have both been very anxious.' She added, 'I should have wired from Burcombe, but as I drove through I saw that the post-office was shut.' Again, as she spoke, she looked from the one to the other, and said rather coldly, 'But it's not so very late, after all.' Then she passed through into her own room, and Motey silently followed her.

That same night Wantley was sitting up, fully an hour after every one else had gone up to bed, smoking and reading, when Lady Wantley came into the room, which, as far as he knew, had never been entered by her since it had been set apart for his own use.

The young man rose, and tried to keep the surprise he felt out of his face. For a moment—a very disagreeable moment—he wondered if she had come to speak to him about Cecily Wake.

The great Lord Wantley had had a strong prejudice against Roman Catholics, and it was, of course, quite possible that his widow might consider herself bound to protest against the idea of a marriage between his successor and a Catholic girl. But he soon felt reassured on this point.

In a few moments he learnt that Lady Wantley had sought him out for a very different reason. 'I have to see Mr. Gumberg on urgent private business,' she said, 'and I have come to ask you if you will accompany me to London to-morrow morning. It is all-important that we should go quite early.'

'Certainly,' he said quickly; 'I will arrange everything.'

'Everything is arranged,' observed Lady Wantley

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very quietly. 'I have ordered the carriage for seven, and I have written a note to Penelope explaining my absence, but I have not mentioned the name of the person I am going to see. To do so was not necessary, and I beg that you also will keep it secret.'

CHAPTER XIV

'When Man and Woman are agreed, what can the Kazi do?'
Indian Proverb.

I

LADY WANTLEY, as she journeyed up to town, tended very kindly by her companion, who possessed the power the normal man often lacks of making any woman in his charge feel comfortable and at ease, thought intensely of her coming interview with Mr. Julius Gumberg. She had a sincere belief in his worldly wisdom, and a vague conviction—not the less real in that she could not have given any reason for her feeling—that the power of his guile, combined with that of her prayers, would succeed where either alone might fail. Thus had she persuaded herself in the long watches of the night, while debating whether she should go to town and entreat her old friend's help.

In spite of what the censorious may say and believe, there is no chasm, among the many which yawn round our poor humanity, on the brink of which there is so much hesitation, and drawing back at the last moment, as on that where the leap involves a loss of moral reputation.

Even in the course of what had been a very sheltered life, Lady Wantley had become aware of many such averted tragedies, of more than one arrested flight, of more than one successful conflict against tremendous odds—tremendous because the victory had

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remained with one whose own heart had been traitor to the cause.

But her intuitive knowledge of her daughter's character warred with any hope that Penelope, having once made up her mind, would draw back. The mother was dimly aware that the barrier must be raised from the outside, and that the appeal must be made in this case to the man, and not to the woman.

So little like her father in most things, Mrs. Robinson had inherited from him a quality which his critics had called 'obstinacy,' and his admirers 'exceptional steadfastness of character.' Opposition had always strengthened Lord Wantley's power of performance, and, as his wife remembered only too clearly, in Penelope's early love affair it had been David Winfrith, and not the impulsive, headstrong girl, who had given way before the father's stern and inexorable command.

Lady Wantley was one of those fortunate people—more often to be found in a former generation than in our own—to whom their human possessions appear to be well-nigh perfect. In her eyes Mrs. Robinson was the most beautiful, the most gifted, the most generous-hearted, of God's creatures; and though she reluctantly admitted to herself that her daughter lacked spiritual perfection, the mother believed that in time this also would be added to her beloved child. Even now it did not occur to Lady Wantley that Penelope might be, in this matter, herself to blame. Instead, she reserved the whole strength of her condemnation for Sir George Downing, and she was on the way to persuade herself—as, indeed, she did in time come to do—that, in order to accomplish his fell purpose, this strange man had used unholy Eastern arts to snare Penelope, the fair guerdon for whom such a fighter as Persian Downing might well be willing to risk body and soul.

Wantley, as he lay back in the railway-carriage, his

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eyes half closed, holding a French novel open in his left hand, looked at the figure sitting opposite to him with a good deal of sympathy and curiosity. He knew a little, and guessed much more, concerning that which had brought about this hurried journey. But he wondered how Lady Wantley's eyes had been opened to a state of things none seemed to have suspected save Miss Wake. Indeed, as regarded himself, his cousin's odd, altered manner had been so far the only confirmation of Theresa Wake's suspicion.

Perhaps, after all, Lady Wantley had reason to fear something tangible, definite. If so, if Penelope was contemplating any act of open folly, then, so said Wantley to himself, her mother was well advised to seek the help of such a man as was Mr. Julius Gumberg.

This curious journey, taken at such short notice and so secretly, reminded Wantley of other and very different journeys taken by him as a boy and youth in Lady Wantley's company—Progresses (he recalled with a smile his mother's satirical word) during which Lord and Lady Wantley had headed a retinue consisting, not only of courier, secretary, maids, valets, and nurses, but also of humble friends in need of rest and change, while he, Ludovic Wantley, had been the only 'odd man out' of the party.

Those days had not been happy days, but his heart involuntarily softened as he looked at his companion and saw the worn face, the sunken eyes. They made him realize how greatly Lady Wantley had aged and altered during her years of widowhood.

In her husband's lifetime she had been a singularly lovely and gracious figure, of curiously still demeanour and abstracted manner, treated with an almost idolatrous devotion by those about her. In those far-away days his aunt—for so he had been taught to call her—had always worn, even when on long, dusty Continental journeys, pale lavenders, soft greys, and ivory

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whites, each of her garments being fashioned in a way which, while scrupulously simple, yet heightened the quality of her physical beauty, and set her apart as on a pinnacle of exquisite and spotless womanliness.

Wantley remembered the kind of sensation which the great English milord and his lady naturally created in the little-frequented French and German towns selected by them for sometimes prolonged halts.

To-day, as he sat opposite to her, there came over him with extraordinary vividness the recollection of one such sojourn in a Bavarian village overhung by an historic castle, the owner of which had invited Lord Wantley and his whole party to spend a day there. The young man recalled with whimsical clearness each incident of what had been an enchanting episode—the hours spent in the green alleys of a park of which the still canals, stone terraces, and formal statuary recalled, as they were meant to do, Versailles, for the place had been designed in those far-off days when France and the French ideal of life still ruled the German imagination.

He remembered the fair-haired German girl whose gentle presence had for him dominated the scene—her shy kindliness, the contrast between her good English and his own and his cousin's indifferent German; and then the feeling with which he had heard some passing words—a brief question and a briefer answer—exchanged between the hospitable Prince and the noble philanthropist: 'A charming lad—doubtless your eldest son?' And the quick answer, 'No, no! quite a distant kinsman.' The words had rankled, and over years.

Lady Wantley had never been to London in August, and so she had thought to find a town deserted, save for the consoling oasis of St. James's Place.

She looked through the windows of the four-wheeled cab, also an utterly unfamiliar form of conveyance,

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with a feeling of alarm and discomfort. 'How many people there seem to be left in London!' she said at last, rather nervously.

'You need not fear that you will see any one that you know,' Wantley answered dryly. 'Still Mr. Gumberg is not the only Londoner who stays in London through the summer. The difference between himself and his fellow-townsmen is that he chooses to remain, and that they must do so.'

No other word was said during the long, slow drive, spent by Wantley in wondering whether he would find his club open, and how, if not, he should dispose of himself during Lady Wantley's interview with Mr. Gumberg. But for the parting for a whole day from Cecily Wake, he would have enjoyed rather than otherwise this strange expedition, for he had been flattered and touched by the confidence reposed in him.

As the cab finally turned down St. James's Street, he took the hand, still soft and of perfect shape, which lay nearest to his on Lady Wantley's knee. 'We are nearly there,' he said. 'I will see you into the hall, and then go off for an hour.'

II

Mr. Gumberg was one of those who early school themselves to wait on life. Sitting in the pretty, gay morning-room, which opened upon a stately little garden—designed in the days when Italy was to the cultivated Englishman what the England of to-day is to the travelled American—he was rarely disappointed, even in August, as to what the day would bring forth.

Few afternoons went by but some acquaintance journeyed westward from the City to ask his advice concerning matters of business moment. In the hottest summer weather foreigners of distinction would find their way to St. James's Place, bearing

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letters of courteous introduction, couched in well-turned phrases, of which the diction, even in France and Austria, will soon be a lost art. And then, again, friends passing through town would remember the old man, and hasten to spend with him an idle hour, bearing with them a budget of the news he loved to hear.

But it was the day bringing forth the utterly unexpected that renewed Mr. Julius Gumberg's grip on life. It was then that he felt he was still taking part in the world's affairs, for the unexpected, in his case, almost always meant an appeal connected with one of those byways of human life in which he still took so vivid and so practical an interest.

To the old worldling a call from Lady Wantley had always been something of an event, and this over fifty years of their two lives. He respected her reserve, he admired her reticence, and, while himself so deeply interested in those about him, he yet delighted in the company of the one woman of his acquaintance whom he knew to have ever regarded the soul and the future life as of such infinitely more moment than the body and the pleasant world about her.

She was herself quite unaware of the peculiar feeling with which her old friend regarded her, and ignorant that on the rare occasions of her visits to St. James's Place no other visitor was welcome, or, indeed, tolerated. Still, at this painful, anguished moment of her life some subtle instinct caused her to turn to one with whom, in many ways, she had so little in common. She felt secure of his sympathy, and had implicit trust in his discretion; indeed, her belief in him extended to the hope that he would suggest a way by which Penelope should surely be saved from what the mother, full of pain and shrinking terror, could not but regard as a most awful fate.

The interview began badly. The gay little garden room, which still kept something of the insouciant,

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roguish charm of the famous eighteenth-century beauty from whose executors Mr. Julius Gumberg had originally purchased the house, formed an incongruous background to the shrunken figure, the parchment-coloured face, the hairless head, always, however, covered with a skull-cap, of Lady Wantley's old friend.

Gilt-rimmed, tarnished mirrors destroyed the sense of solitude, and seemed to Mr. Gumberg's visitor to reflect shadowy witnesses and mocking eavesdroppers of her shame and distress.

So strong was this impression that Lady Wantley doubted whether she had been well advised in coming. She felt inclined to get up and go away; and something of what was passing in her mind was divined by her host.

When the first long pause between them became oppressive, the old man, lifting himself somewhat painfully from his chair, rang the bell which always stood at his elbow. 'We shall be more at ease, and less likely to be disturbed upstairs,' he said briefly.

He was extremely curious to know what had brought Lady Wantley to town, what could be the matter concerning which she had evidently come to consult him; but he was too experienced a confessor to hasten confidences by a word.

The comfort of no human being, save that of his present visitor, could have made Mr. Julius Gumberg show himself, as he was about to do, and for no tangible reason, at a disadvantage—that is, so weighted with physical infirmity as to be compelled, when walking upstairs, to seek the assistance of his manservant's arm and guiding hand. His acute, well-trained intellect had remained so keen, and his powers of transacting business had diminished so little, that he felt, with a bitterness none the less intense because so gallantly concealed, the humiliations attendant on advancing age.

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Accordingly, when quiet, careful Jackson came in answer to his master's summons, her host impatiently motioned Lady Wantley to precede him up the narrow stairs which connected the garden room with the octagon library, where Mr. Gumberg always received his friends in winter and in spring, and which appeared better suited to the receiving of confidences and the giving of advice than did the room below.

Once there—once, as it were, settled against his own familiar background, leaning back in his leather armchair, his man dismissed, his visitor seated opposite him in the pretty, comfortable chair always drawn forward when the old man was honoured by the visit of a fair friend—Mr. Gumberg felt rewarded for the late stripping of himself of personal dignity, for he perceived, by certain infallible signs, that now she would tell him all that was in her mind.

With scarce any preamble, Lady Wantley plunged into the middle of her story. In disconnected, but clearly worded, phrases, she told of her more than suspicion, of her certainty, of the coming peril. But, whereas she spoke of Downing by name, describing his action with a Biblical plainness of language which startled her old friend, she concealed the name of the woman in the case, beseeching Mr. Gumberg's intervention and advice on behalf 'of one known to you, but whose name I beg you not to inquire or try to discover.'

It was with eager, painful interest and growing excitement that the old man, his hand held shell-like to his ear, heard in silence the story she had come to tell. She had not spoken many words, and had used but little of the innocent craft to which she was so unaccustomed, before Mr. Julius Gumberg knew only too well the name of the woman for whom Lady Wantley was entreating his advice and help.

At last, when she had said all there was to say, she looked at her old friend dumbly, appealingly; and it

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was rather in answer to that look than to any word uttered by her that he said:

‘Were you anyone else, I would respect your wish to conceal this lady’s name. Nay, more: were she other than who she is, you should leave me to-day believing that you had been successful in hiding from me the name of your friend. But, Lady Wantley, I care for you.’ He paused, then feelingly added: ‘I have cared for you all, too well, during nearly the whole of my life, to tolerate this fiction. What you have come to tell me is indeed news, and painful news, to me, but Sir George Downing himself told me, during the few days he was here, that he was acquainted with Penelope, and that he had met her abroad this spring.’

And having thus cleared the decks for action, he remained silent for a few moments, his domed head sunk on his breast, thinking deeply.

George Downing and Penelope Wantley? Amazing, incredible, and most sinister conjunction! Why, the affair must have been going on—nay, the coming catastrophe, this mad scheme of going away together to form a permanent alliance, ‘offensive and defensive’ (the old man would have chuckled but for the poignant wretchedness of the face now hidden in Lady Wantley’s hands) must have been hatching—when Downing was with him here, in St. James’s Place!

He cast his mind back; he tried to remember a conversation held in this very room only two or three weeks ago. But Mr. Gumberg had come to a time of life when it is more easy to recall conversations of half a century old than words uttered yesterday.

He had indeed been blind, ‘amazing blind, and stupid, stupid, stupid!’ so he exclaimed to himself, vexed that no suspicion of the truth should have crossed his mind while Downing had been asking him those eager, insistent questions concerning Mrs. Robinson and the Wantley family.

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And now? Well, now that the house was well alight they came and asked him, Mr. Gumberg, how to extinguish the flames. This was not the first time—no, not by many—that the old man had been required to lend his aid in such a case, and, as a rule, he always advised that the fire be left to burn itself out. The counsellor's long experience had taught him that such flames always did burn out if left severely alone—if no fuel, in the shape of lamentations and good advice, were added by the incautious.

But this matter of Downing and Mrs. Robinson was more complicated than most. Pursuing his favourite metaphor, the old man said to himself that here was no flimsy thatch of straw which, when the embers were cold, could be restored, patched up again, on the old walls. Rather was Penelope like to one of those old-world frigates, proudly riding the sea, all afire and aglow, a wonderful sight to those safe on shore, but of whose splendour there would remain nothing but a shapeless, indescribable hulk, when all she bore had been burnt to the water's edge.

Sitting there, turning about in his still agile mind the story, as just told him in bare outline, he reminded himself that Mrs. Robinson, though a powerful, wilful creature, was not the stuff out of which have been fashioned the great, steadfast lovers of the world.

'Why, if all were well—if she became the man's wife ten times over—she would never be content to spend her whole life in Teheran!' he muttered; and then more loudly: 'No, no; we must find a way out!'

One question he longed to ask of Lady Wantley, for he felt that on the true answer much depended that would modify his judgment, and guide his opinion, as to what the immediate future must bring. But Mr. Gumberg was old-fashioned; his code as to what could, or rather what could not, be said to a lady was strict and meagre. Accordingly, he felt it impossible

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to put to this revered and trustful friend the question he longed to utter. Still, there might be a way round. He asked abruptly: 'How much of the six months—I don't think it was more—did Penelope actually spend at the Settlement? I mean, of course, between her wedding-day and poor young Robinson's death?'

Lady Wantley hesitated. She cast her mind back, then answered reluctantly: 'She was often away during the four months—it was only four months. But, then, that was utterly different.' A faint colour came into the mother's pale cheeks. 'Penelope did not care for poor Melancthon as she seems to care, now——'

'I know! I know!' The four words were snarled out rather than spoken. 'Nun and monk, that was the notion! No doubt you're right: there was nothing to keep her there, after all!'

He was so concerned with the problem filling both their minds for the moment he forgot his usual punctiliousness of speech, but to Lady Wantley there came a certain fierce comfort from his amazing frankness. She felt that he knew, that he understood, the unusual difficulty of the case, and in answer to his next words, 'I had actually forgotten all that for the moment, but of course it complicates matters devilishly!' she nodded her head twice in assent.

'You see them together,' he went on abruptly. 'Does she seem'—sought for a word, weighed one or two, rejected them, and finally chose 'bewitched?'

And then—but this time so much to himself that his listener heard no word of it—he added: 'Lucky George! Eh? Lucky George!'

Lady Wantley bent forward. Her grey eyes shone with excitement and anger. 'Yes, bewitched—that's the right word! Sir George Downing has bewitched my poor unhappy child. One who was there, our old nurse—you remember Mrs. Mote?—declares that she altered completely from the moment they first met.

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Why, she hasn't known him three months, and yet he's persuaded her to contemplate this thing—this going with him——'

She stopped speaking abruptly, choked with the horror of the thought, and then slowly added: 'I know—at least, I think I know—that you do not believe, as I believe, in the active, all-devouring power of the Evil One.' Her voice sank, but Mr. Gumberg caught the muttered words, 'Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.'

Mr. Gumberg smiled a queer little enigmatical smile. 'The old nurse was there, you say? She never left her mistress, eh?' He waited, and looked hard at Lady Wantley. But no gleam of comprehension of his meaning came into her worn eyes. 'What does she think? what does the old nurse say to it all?'

Again Lady Wantley covered her face with her hands. 'She's known it all longer than I have. She's in agony—agony, for she feels surer every day that the child means to go away with him—soon—at once—if we cannot devise some means of stopping them.'

'I take it that you have said nothing to your daughter—to Penelope—as yet?'

Lady Wantley raised her head, and he saw for a moment her convulsed, disfigured features. 'No, I have said nothing. I cannot speak to her on such a matter as this. Besides, she would not tolerate it. But you, dear friend——'

She suddenly rose from her chair, a tall, imposing figure, then moved closer to him, and looked imploringly down into the wrinkled, impassive face. 'I have thought that you, perhaps, would consent to speak to Sir George Downing? I know it is asking much of your old friendship for us.'

Mr. Gumberg coughed. He moved uneasily in his

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chair. 'In such a matter,' he began, 'one man can scarcely interfere with another man's business. Supposing I do as you wish, can we expect Downing to draw back now, if she—Penelope—has made up her mind to go on? Would you have him put on her so mortal an affront?'

Lady Wantley only looked at him bewildered. Such sophistry was not for her.

'But from the point of view of Sir George Downing's own life and career,' she said falteringly, 'I understand—indeed, Penelope herself has told me—that the one object of his life for many years past has been to rehabilitate himself. Could you not point out to him how greatly this would injure him with those whose good opinion he wishes to retain? Think of what all my husband's old friends and colleagues will feel;' and he saw that her hands were trembling.

Mr. Gumberg looked at Lady Wantley consideringly. He was surprised that she had brought herself to think over the matter from so practical a point of view. She had again sat down, and was gazing at him in a collected, earnest manner.

'He has weighed all that, depend upon it,' he said shortly. 'No, no! with such a man as George Downing one must appeal to something higher than self-interest. We must realize—it's no use blinking the fact—that we are now dealing, or attempting to deal, with a feeling none the less strong because you and I happen to have no sympathy with it—or perhaps I should say, as regards myself, have outlived it.'

He waited a moment, then concluded deliberately:

'In your place, Lady Wantley, I should make a personal appeal to Downing. Choose a time when Penelope is out of the way, and tell him the truth—that he does not know her as you know her, and that, even putting aside other and more obvious reasons which should make him pause, you are sure that she

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would not be happy in the life he has to offer her. Lastly, and most urgently, appeal to him for time. Time,' repeated the old man, with a certain solemnity—'time smooths out many crooked things. But why should I try and prompt you? You will know what to say better than I could tell you. And Downing, take my word for it, is not the man to seize an unfair advantage. Ask him to go away, alone, to give her more time for consideration. Such a serious business as they apparently both regard it—and most creditable it is to both of them that they should do so,' he added in a half-aside—'should not be settled in a hurry. Why, a few weeks ago each didn't know the other lived, and now nothing short will content them but the spending of their whole lives together! Though I have but little belief in its being of any use, I will comply with your request that I should write to him. As to what I say when I do write, you must leave that to me; but be sure that I will do my best.'

'You will write to him? Oh, how can I thank you adequately, my friend—my good friend!'

Lady Wantley's eyes filled with grateful tears, and a stifling weight seemed lifted from her heart. She felt that she had accomplished that which she had come to do, and she paid no heed to the admonition, 'Don't count too much on my influence with Downing.'

They both stood up, Mr. Gumberg leaning his left hand on his stick, while the other clasped hers in kindly, mute farewell.

'Do you remember,' she asked, rather shyly, 'your first visit to Oglethorpe, when I was a little girl? My mother, my dear, dear mother, was so interested in you. I remember she said you were such a well-behaved and intelligent youth. Of course, I know you came again when we were both older, but when I see you I always think of our first meeting. I saw no young folk at all in those years.'

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‘No,’ said Mr. Gumberg, a little stiffly, ‘I have forgotten nothing. Your parents, both then and later, were very kind to me, and I have always felt grateful for my reception at Oglethorpe.’ He hesitated a moment, and then added, with an odd little old-fashioned bow over the hand he still held: ‘And also for that in later days, at Monk’s Eype and at Marston Lydiate.’

‘Ah yes,’ she said, ‘I know how sincere a friendship my husband felt for you. But, as I said just now, I myself prefer to associate you in my own mind with my own home—with my dear father and mother.’

When Lady Wantley had left him, and after the house had settled down again into its usual summer stillness and silence, Mr. Gumberg, acting on a sudden impulse, did that which he lived to regret—though only, it must be admitted, when in a cynical mood—to the end of his life. Slowly he made his way to the mahogany cupboard where he kept some of his choicest treasures, including the rarer of his unframed prints. From there he extracted a small portfolio, and returning to his armchair, he propped it up on the sloping desk at his elbow. For a few moments his fingers fumbled with the green silk strings, and he turned over the contents with eager hands.

‘The Lady and her Pack.’ Mr. Gumberg peered musingly at the curious rudely-coloured design. He wondered half suspiciously whether it was only his fancy that detected a certain similarity between the horsewoman, sitting so squarely and so gallantly on her huge roan, and the lady who had just left him. Both figures—that of Rosina Bellamont and that of Lady Wantley—had about them a certain dauntlessness, a look of high courage.

Mr. Gumberg hastily turned the little print about. He took up a magnifying-glass, and carefully read through the notes with which the reverse side was

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covered, and which, in addition to names and dates, gave a number of more intimate particulars concerning the various human-faced hounds composing the pack.

Then, with a certain deliberateness, he lighted the little red taper with the help of which he always sealed his letters, and, holding what had been the most valued of his minor treasures over the flame, Mr. Gumberg watched it vanish into the flickering air above the taper. But during the rest of that afternoon and evening his eyes often turned towards the little tear-bottle, brought to him by a friend from Rome, where he had carefully placed the pinch of brown ash which was all that now remained of 'The Lady and her Pack.'

CHAPTER XV

'Ah, dear, but come thou back to me!
Whatever change the days have wrought,
I find not yet one lonely thought
That cries against my wish for thee.'

I

THERE are moments in the life of almost every human being when the sands seem to be running out, when even the most careless, the least scrupulous, feels a pang at the thought of all that has been left undone, and, even more, of all that must be left unfinished and incomplete. If the knowledge comes in the shape of a positive warning that death is at hand, and will have to be faced in three months, in six months, in a year, then the wise man sets his house in order as best he can, and leaves the rest to God, or to that ordered chance in which so many now believe as a substitute for Divine Providence. But when, as perhaps more

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often happens in this strange, complicated world, a human being has deliberately so set the hour-glass of his life that the sands run out far more quickly than they were ever meant to do, and when the last grain will bring, not death, but some astounding change in life, dividing the what has been from the what will be more painfully than would death itself; then the sense of responsibility, maybe the simple fear of what may befall, is apt to make even the strongest nature quake.

Penelope had come to such a moment. She had so set her hour-glass that now the sands were running out with what appeared to be relentless haste, while the time left to her was beginning to seem so short, and the things to be done in that same short time so many. She did not waver, or rather she was not aware that, had it been possible, she would perhaps have wavered. Instead, she was only conscious of a desire to hasten on—to see everything cleared out of her way. One matter which had never before troubled her now gave her much anxious thought—she longed to retain, as far as might be possible, the good opinion of the few people who really loved her.

And so it was with a mind deeply troubled that she stood waiting for Winfrith, not in the studio, where every time she entered it everything reminded her more and more of the life she was leaving, but in the high, narrow room which corresponded on the ground-floor to Mrs. Mote's bedroom above, and where still remained traces of the time when it had been the study of Penelope's father—in a very real sense a workroom, for there a great worker had spent many solitary hours.

On the ugly, substantial writing-table, so placed that the writer commanded the whole of the wonderful view of the terraced gardens, the irregular cliff-line, and the broad seas spread out below, Mrs. Robinson had placed a number of documents tied up with red tape, also two small black despatch-boxes, each stamped

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with the initials M. W. R. These preparations for what she intended should be a short business interview gave her courage. As she waited, nervously conscious that Winfrith was now, what he so rarely was, a few minutes late, she turned and walked up and down the narrow room, longing for the door to open and let him in, longing even more for the moment when it should open and let him out.

At last the man she waited for came in smiling. One of those instincts which tell only a half-truth made him aware that the news he brought would greatly gratify her. 'Sir George Downing has won all along the line,' he said boyishly, while shaking hands. 'We are going to send him the man he wants. He ought to be very much obliged to you.' He added, with the touch of condescension which—from him to her—always teased and yet always touched Penelope, 'The great man owes you far more than he knows. How odd that he should have met you, and so have come across me! He is even more worth meeting than I had expected,' he concluded hesitatingly. I wonder why there is still so strong a prejudice against him.'

'Give a dog a bad name,' she said indifferently, and then turned the key in the lock of the door. Penelope had inherited from her methodical father an impatience of interruption. 'Sit down here at the table,' she commanded, 'and now let us put aside Sir George Downing and his affairs, for just now I am more interested in my own. Do you remember the exact terms of the deed—I know you have seen it—in which were arranged all the money matters connected with the Settlement?'

'Yes,' he answered at once, 'I remember the terms quite well. The buildings are left in trust, and my father is one of the trustees; but the income remains entirely in your hands. You could withdraw all

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supplies to-morrow, or, to put it in another way, you could spend all your income, and so have to pay the claims of the Settlement out of capital. I always thought it a very bad arrangement.' He spoke with a certain sharpness, as if the discussion were distasteful to him.

Penelope looked up with some anger, and 'My husband trusted me absolutely,' she said rather proudly.

The man sitting opposite to her reddened darkly. He always disliked to hear Penelope mention Melancthon Robinson; the slightest allusion to the founder of the Settlement, when made by her, roused a violent primeval instinct, which insisted on recognition of his own original claim to the beautiful, elusive creature with whom his relations had now been for so long lacking in sincerity. 'That's nonsense,' he said harshly. 'He had no right to do such a thing with a girl of two-and-twenty.'

'One-and-twenty,' she corrected quickly.

He went on, avoiding her eyes, but his voice lowering, losing its harshness, in spite of himself. 'It was a most unfair responsibility to put upon you. However intelligent and businesslike,' he added, 'however trusted and worthy of trust——'

It was Penelope's turn to redden. 'I do not say I was, or am, worthy of such a trust,' she said rather coldly. 'You know, or perhaps you have forgotten, that I thought my cousin would help me. He refused, and it was because you, David, were so good to me then'—Penelope leant forward; she put her hand, her slender, ringless left hand, on his sleeve for a moment, and the blue eyes which met his in quick appeal seemed darker, softer than usual—'because you have always been good to me, that I now ask your advice. It is for the last time——'

Winfrith suddenly focussed his mind into close attention. Very slowly, hardly conscious of what

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he was doing, he moved the chair on which he was sitting further away from hers, and set a guard on his face.

There had been a time, shortly after the renewal of their intimacy, when David Winfrith had schooled himself, with what he thought was easy philosophy, to hear the announcement of Penelope's remarriage. But curiously soon, and Mrs. Robinson had watched with mischievous interest the different workings of his mind, the young man had seen reason to assure himself that his new-found friend would do wisely to remain free as himself from all sentimental entanglements, while yet always able to benefit by his superior masculine sense and knowledge, both of the world and of affairs.

Soon also he had come to fear for her, and this quite honestly, the fortune-hunters with whom he felt rather than knew her to be, in those early days, encompassed. A word denying any intention of remarriage—and it was a word which Penelope, at that time of her life and even for long after, could have uttered with all sincerity—would have made Winfrith easy in his mind; but the word was never uttered. Mrs. Robinson had had no desire to let the nearest, in a sense the dearest, and in any case the most faithful and trustworthy of her mentors, feel too great a sense of security.

And so their strange relationship had remained, and that over years, a source of pleasant confidence and sentimental amusement to the woman, of subtle charm and ever-recurring interest to the man.

When he turned restive, as sometimes though rarely happened, Penelope dealt out the rope with no niggard hand, or, better still, provoked something tantamount to a quarrel, followed in due course by the inevitable healing reconciliation.

But not even his interest in Mrs. Robinson's affairs—for so he described, even to himself, the feeling

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which dominated him—had ever caused Winfrith to neglect his own work, or the public business with which he was concerned; and this divided allegiance, as he sometimes suspected, caused her more real annoyance than his frequent and frank criticisms of her actions, and his tacit refusal to join in the pretty flatteries of her other friends. As Penelope had learnt with anger, there were times and seasons when even the most imperious note, the most urgent appeal, could not bring him to her side. But while this state of things had irked her greatly, especially in the early days of the renewal of their friendship, she had always been aware that any ordinary pleasure or personal concern was always flung aside, counted as nothing to the delight of being with her and of acting as her confidential adviser and friend.

To-day, while looking into his plain face, aware of the sternness of the strong jaw, the ugly peculiarity of an exceptionally long upper lip, Penelope's heart contracted with sudden tenderness as she evoked the memory of the long years during which they had known one another with so deep, so wordless, an intimacy.

For a moment there was silence between them. Then he said, rather sharply: 'Well, what is it you want me to do? Of course I will give you the best advice in my power, and not, I hope, for the last time.'

As he spoke he stood up and placed himself with his back to the window, and for a moment Penelope saw the heavy, broad-shouldered figure outlined against the sea and sky, his face—and this vaguely relieved her—being in complete shadow. But she turned away, looked straight before her as she said quickly, her voice full of defiant decision: 'Yes, I want to ask your advice, and more, to beg you to help me about a certain matter.' She paused, and added: 'I have made some notes on a piece of paper. I think I laid it down before you came in.'

Winfrith wheeled round, and looked at the table

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against which he had been leaning. On coming into the room he had paid no attention to Penelope's preparations for their interview, but now, as he became aware of the odd little bundles of lawyer's letters, each tied together with tape, and of the despatch-boxes, inscribed with the initials M. W. R., he felt amused, and even a little touched. 'These look quite old papers,' he said kindly. 'Perhaps you forgot to bring your notes in here with you, or—wait a moment—what is that you are holding in your hand?'

She frowned with annoyance. 'How stupid I am!' But the little episode relieved the tension between them; and, as a child might have done to a play-fellow, she suddenly put out her hand, and, taking his, pulled him down beside her on the long, low, leather-covered couch. 'I want to speak to you about a really serious business, and I know—at least, I am afraid—that you will disapprove of what I want to do, and that you may try and make me alter my mind.'

She spoke nervously, with a new, a gentler, note in her voice. A blessed peace stole into Winfrith's heart; he chased the dread which had for the moment possessed him, and it was in his usual tone, with his usual half-bantering manner, that he asked the reproachful question, 'Why did you say that—I mean, as to this being the last time? Surely I have not deserved that you should say such things to me!'

'No, indeed—indeed you have not!' And the hurried humility with which she spoke might well have re-awakened his premonition of coming pain and parting. 'But you will soon understand what I meant, when I have explained everything.'

Again there was silence between them; but Winfrith, her last words sounding in his ears, feeling her dear nearness, though he had moved somewhat away from where she had placed him, was in no haste to hear her confidences. Secretly he pledged himself not to scold her—indeed, to listen patiently, and to

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help her, however unpractical and foolish the scheme for which she sought his help.

At last Penelope, paler than her wont, her voice tremulous, lacking its usual hard, bell-like quality of tone, spoke, and to some purpose: 'I have made up my mind to do what you have always wished—that is, to endow the Settlement. Though what you said just now about my husband and his arrangements made me angry, I know it was true. He ought not to have left me such power.'

Winfrith felt relieved but bewildered, and straight-way he blundered. 'Certainly something of the kind ought to have been done long ago, but you always opposed it. You——'

'I suppose I have the right to change my mind, to be guided by circumstances? Besides, I am tired, utterly tired, of the responsibility as well as of the Settlement.' She looked at him fixedly for a moment. 'I know what you would like to say; that I have had nothing to do with it, in a real sense, for many years past. But that is false; no day goes by without my receiving some tiresome letter or letters. Whenever any of the "Settlers"——Winfrith had never before heard her use the contemptuous term——' fall out, and they are always falling out——'

'That at least is untrue,' he interrupted.

'Yes, they do—they do! And when they do, then they write to me to patch up the quarrel!'

She paused, then went on in a more measured voice: 'And there are other things! How would you like it if, when acting the part of a traitor to your party, you were always being praised for your loyalty? I am a traitor to all that the Settlement represents. I hate——no, I do not hate, I despise——the wretched human beings to whom poor Melancthon gave up his life. I don't think they are worth the trouble expended on them. When I come into personal contact with them, of course I am sorry, so I am for the ants when Brown

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Bess puts her foot on an ant-hill! And to you, David, I have never pretended otherwise. Of course I recognise that in so feeling I am almost alone. Some of the people I have most cared for, my father—she hesitated and added more gently—‘you yourself, feel quite otherwise.’

Then breaking off short, she glanced down at the paper she held in her hand, and Winfrith saw with some surprise that it was covered with neatly pencilled notes. ‘But, after all, I own no apology for what I feel to any human being, and so now let us consider the practical side of the matter. Apart from the question of the endowment, I wish arrangements to be made by which Cecily Wake can carry out her experiment—I mean her co-operative cheap food idea.’

Winfrith bit his lip. This, then, was the new scheme? He had never liked Cecily Wake; perhaps—but of this, of course, he was totally unaware—he was irritated by the girl’s enthusiastic affection for Penelope, so much more unobtrusive and sincere than that of some of those whom he also unconsciously regarded as his rivals. Then, again, Cecily, like himself, had the power, in spite of her youth, in spite even of a certain childishness of which the bloom had not been rubbed off in the two years spent by her in working at the Settlement, of obtaining her own way, and of imposing her own point of view on others. Finally, he had the average Englishman’s distrust of Roman Catholicism, and naturally suspected the motives of a convent-bred girl.

As to the proposed scheme, it was in some ways childish, in others revolutionary. In her dreams Cecily Wake had seen the squalid neighbourhoods about the Settlement each rejoicing in its own huge cheap and pure food emporium. To Winfrith the idea was little less than absurd, and to be, from every point of view, deprecated and discouraged; so he now

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nerved himself, without any great difficulty, to opposition.

'Miss Wake's scheme, from what I can make of it,' he said coldly, 'would not only require the outlay of a considerable amount of capital, but, what is more serious, could not but disorganize local trade.'

Penelope frowned. 'I know, I know! You've said all that to me before. As to the money required, of course there will be plenty of money. You have never liked Cecily; but still, even you must admit that she has done very well, and, after all, both Philip Hammond and Mrs. Pomfret agree that something of the kind she suggests is badly needed. I remember that I myself, in old days, always considered that we thought far too much of our protégés' minds and morals, and far too little of their bodies; and I know I heartily sympathized with the poor wretches who, when they discovered that there were to be no more doles, broke all the windows of good Mr. B.'

Winfrith vehemently disagreed, but it was an old quarrel between them, and he refused to be drawn.

'To return to the main question,' he said quietly, 'it seems to me to be entirely one of money. If you endow the Settlement, as I understand you mean to do—that is, adequately—your own income will be greatly lowered, and even so large, so immense a fortune as that left you by your husband'—he brought out the word with a gulp—'will be seriously affected. You know sometimes, as it is, you have not found matters very easy.'

He hesitated, for here he felt on delicate ground. The way in which this, to him, dearest of women, dowered with apparently such simple personal tastes, so over-spent her large income as to find it difficult sometimes to meet the claims of the Settlement, had been to him for years a matter of profound astonishment.

'Well, I shall have to manage better in future.'

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She sighed a little wearily. 'As you said just now the money was really left to me in trust;' and, when Winfrith made a gesture of negation, she said, 'Well, most of it was.' And then, with complete change of tone, she said slowly, 'And now I intend to be shut of it all.'

As he looked at her, perplexed, she added: 'You don't know the expression? Ah well, if you had ever lived at the Settlement, even for a short time, you would be quite familiar with it, for there women are always longing to be "shut" of things—principally, of course, of their husbands and babies. But seriously, David, what I want you to tell me and to help me to do concerns the practical side of this great renouncement.'

There had come again into her voice, during the last few moments, the satirical ring he dreaded and disliked. 'We will take all your remonstrances and reproaches as said'—she softened the discourtesy of her words by the touch for a moment of her hand on his arm. 'And I want it all done at once—within the next few weeks.'

Winfrith smiled, not unkindly. 'So I should suppose,' he said quietly; 'but of course that will be quite impossible.'

'But you have often helped me to get things done quickly,' she cried urgently, 'and it really is most important that these changes and new arrangements should be made now, as soon as possible.'

Winfrith laughed outright. He wondered for a moment, with a certain complacency, whether any man, however foolish and lacking in knowledge of business, could be found to propose so absurd a thing as this clever, and sometimes so shrewd, woman had done.

'Why all this haste?' he asked good-humouredly. 'I'll tell you what we had better do; I will draft a letter, for you to copy, to your lawyers. In this letter we will explain that you wish the arrangements con-

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cerning the Settlement, embodied, I believe, in your will, to be carried out now, in your lifetime; further, you will tell them prettily, in your own words, that you wish the whole thing settled as soon as possible. They will then go into the whole matter, and let you know what can be done, and how long it will take to do it.'

He waited a moment, then continued: 'Now about Miss Wake's scheme. I should suggest its being tried at first on a small scale. I understand she has reduced her demands'—he could not keep his prejudice against Penelope's young friend out of his voice—'to what she calls "a pure milk depôt." Some time ago I did consult a doctor I know on that point, and I admit he thought it a good idea. This portion of her scheme need not cost a great deal of money, and though, of course, it will put all the milkmen against you, as you personally won't be there when their boys come and break the windows of the Settlement, I don't know that that much matters!'

He waited for her answer. These discussions, which had at intervals taken place for many years past between Mrs. Robinson and himself always amused him and bored her, the more so that, after a spirited struggle on her part, he generally got his own way.

But to-day Penelope was not in fighting trim. 'You don't understand,' she said at length, and in a voice so low that he had to bend forward to hear her words. 'This is only a part of what I want you to do for me. You referred just now to my will. Supposing that I died suddenly—that I was killed out riding, for instance; you, as my executor, would have to see to almost everything, to undertake almost all the arrangements I want you to get done for me now, during the next few weeks.'

Winfrith turned and looked at her keenly. She met his gaze unflinchingly; but the colour had gone from her face, the proud mouth, which he had once

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kissed so often, and which he had once refused to kiss (did Penelope ever remember, too? he wondered; he never forgot) was trembling, and her eyes met his in questioning, shrinking distress at the pain she felt herself about to inflict.

And then suddenly he realized, with a feeling of sharp revolt and anguish, that that which he had sometimes thought of as being possible, but which during recent years had gone into the background of his mind—for he was a much-occupied as well as an unimaginative man—had come upon him. He saw that he was going to lose her, that their old relationship was even now severed, and that this was in very truth her last and supreme call on him for help.

But there was no perceptible change in his voice, as he said very quietly: 'Please read me your notes: then I shall understand more clearly what you want done; and once I understand, I will do all in my power to see that your wishes are carried out.'

She bowed her head, and Winfrith listened with dismay and increasing astonishment as Mrs. Robinson explained the scheme, evidently well and carefully thought out, by which she proposed to renounce and distribute the whole of the immense fortune which had been left to her by Melancthon Robinson.

As she spoke, as she read on from her notes, her voice regained something of its sureness of accent; and glancing frequently at the paper she held in her hand, she elaborated the various points, showing more real knowledge of the problems which confront the modern philanthropist than Winfrith would have thought possible.

Then came the sudden, the agonizing, conviction that in this matter Penelope had been helped by some other and more practical mind than her own; and, as this fact became clear, he set his teeth, and forced himself to remember that the man, whoever he might

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be, who had inspired this great renunciation could be no fortune-hunter.

‘Of course, you can guess,’ she said at last—for his silence made her uneasy—‘why I am doing all this. I have as yet told nobody; but my life henceforth will be spent abroad, and ’—again she hesitated painfully—‘the person whose wishes I am now bound to consult absolutely agrees with me, and approves of what I am going to do about Melancthon’s money.’

He brushed aside her last words, and brought himself to consider her material interests, and so, ‘You realize what all this means?’ he said at length. ‘If these arrangements are carried out, your income, in the sense you now understand the word, will be wholly absorbed—gone.’

‘I am retaining everything my father left to me, with the exception of this place,’ she said quickly.

‘With the exception of this place?’ he repeated with dismay. ‘Do you, then, mean to sell Monk’s Eype?’

‘No, no! how could you think of such a thing?’ A tone of profound dejection crept into her voice. ‘What I mean is that, before going away, I intend to hand Monk’s Eype over to Ludovic. He was not fairly treated by my father; but, even as it is with him, he could afford to keep up the villa and the gardens as they should be kept up, and I am sure he will always make my mother welcome, should she care to come here from time to time.’

The accent of pain in her voice again stung Winfrith into protest. ‘Are you sure that you are acting wisely? Of course, I know that it is none of my business.’ And as she made a quick dissenting gesture: ‘If it is—if you will allow it to be my business, then let me say that in this matter of your fortune you are about to take a great risk, and one which you might bitterly regret later on,’ he added deliberately, ‘and for which you might in time be reproached.’

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But as he uttered these last words a sudden change came over Penelope's face. Winfrith had evoked another, a more intimate—ay, and a more eloquent—presence, and as she answered, 'Ah no! I need never be afraid of that,' a strange radiance came over her face, softening the severity of the lines, veiling the brightness of her blue eyes.

Winfrith rose quickly from where he was sitting; he felt an impulse to wound, to strike, and then to flee. 'Men alter,' he said—'men and women, too. You and I——' Then he drove out the jealous devil which had possessed him for a moment, and asked: 'Well, I suppose that is all you wanted to see me about for the present? If you will give me your notes I will go into the matter; and if, as I understand, your marriage is to take place very soon abroad'—he waited for a moment, but there came no word of assent—'that will, of course, be a sufficient reason for pushing on everything as quickly as possible.'

He added, with an air of studied indifference: 'May I ask how long you wish your engagement to be kept secret? Do you, for instance, object to my father being told?'

Then he looked down at her, and what he saw roused every generous instinct, banished unworthy jealousy, and even dulled his bitterness. When had he last seen Penelope weeping? Years and years before, on the day of their parting, when they were still boy and girl lovers. But then her tears had come freely, like those of a child distressed; now no sound came from the bowed figure save long, shuddering sobs. Again he sat down by her. 'My dear,' he said, deeply troubled, 'what is it? What can I do for you?'

'You were so unkind,' she whispered, and he saw that she was trembling, 'you were going away—so coldly.' Then, almost inaudibly, she added: 'I did not think you would care so much.'

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She unclasped the hands in which her face had been hidden, and held them out to him. For a moment he took them in his, crushed the fingers wet with tears, and then let them go. 'Of course I care,' he said at length. 'You would not have me not care. We have been friends so long, you and I.' He stopped abruptly; the memory of many meetings, of many partings, became vivid and intolerable.

They both stood up, and again he made an effort over himself. Once more he took her hands in his, and held them tightly, as he said: 'But you must not distress yourself about me; men have worse things to bear. Think of what happened to my father.' And his voice shook for the first time. Never before, not even as a boy, had Penelope heard him allude to his parents' tragic story. And now this word, meant to comfort her, and perhaps himself, cut her to the heart. Soon he would learn, only too surely, the ironic parity which was to lie between his own and his father's fate.

For a moment she shrank back, then moved swiftly nearer to him; and it was with her arms about his neck, her face looking up into his, that he heard the eager tremulous words: 'David, before you go I want to say something—to tell you, so that you may remember afterwards when I am gone, that till now there has never been anyone else—never, never—anyone but you!' Her head sank on his breast as she added slowly, almost reluctantly: 'Things were not as you, perhaps, think they were between poor Melancthon and myself. We agreed before our marriage that it was only to be a partnership.' As she felt his arms tighten round her, she again lifted her face, and asked: 'Are you shocked? Do you think it was wrong? Motey (no one else ever guessed) thought it very wicked.'

'Then you were—you have always been mine!' he cried; and, as she shrank back, he holding her

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fast to him, 'Tell me,' he asked, 'should I have had a chance, another chance, during all those years?' He added, perhaps guided by some subtle instinct of which he was ashamed, for as he spoke Penelope felt him relaxing the strong grip of the arms which had held her so closely, 'Is there any chance—now?'

She shook her head. Through a blistering veil she saw the set grey face of the man who had loved her so well and long, and for whom she also had cared, if less well, quite as long. 'You had your chance, such as it was, at first,' she said, 'when we were both so young, when I was foolish and you were so wise.' His face contracted at the sad irony in her voice. 'I know now, I even knew then, that my father forced you to act as you did; but I was angered, disappointed, with you and in you. I had thought—I think even Motey expected—that you would have wanted to run away with me. Gretna Green seemed a very real place in those days.' She smiled dolorously. 'If you had been a little stronger or a little weaker, perhaps even a little less reasonable, I should have run away with you, for at that time—ah, David, I was in love with Love, and you were Love.'

'Then I only once forfeited my chance?' he again asked urgently. 'During all these past years it never came again?'

For a moment Penelope hesitated; then, as she lied, she again pressed closer to him, and again the tears ran down her cheeks. 'It never came again,' she repeated. 'But you know, you will always remember when I am gone, that you were the only one, the only one.'

'Is that quite true?' he asked slowly.

'Absolutely true.' She spoke eagerly, defending the truth as she had not been called upon to defend the lie. 'We have had our happy years, David—your years, my dear. You always seemed quite content——'

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‘Did I?’ he said bitterly. ‘Ah well, now comes the turn of the other man!’

Penelope started back, wounded and ashamed. She put her hand over her eyes. For a moment they both felt an intangible, but none the less reproachful, presence between them.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said hurriedly. ‘I should not have said that. Forgive me.’

‘It was my fault,’ she answered coldly. ‘I brought it on myself—I know you had great provocation.’

There was a painful moment of silence. ‘I think I must leave you now,’ she said at length, ‘I will write to you to-morrow. I do not think our meeting again would be of any use. We should both say’—her voice quivered—‘and perhaps do, things we should regret later.’ She held out her hand, her head still averted, wishing her anger, her disappointment, with Winfrith to endure.

But suddenly he drew her again, this time resisting, into his arms. ‘We can’t part like this,’ he whispered urgently. ‘Forgive the brutish thing I said! I promise I will never so offend again—I swear I will respect him—the man you love, I mean.’ To keep her another moment in his arms he abased himself yet further. ‘You must not be afraid that I shall quarrel with your choice. Surely we can remain friends—he shall have no reason to be jealous of me.’

But punishment came swift and sure. Again he felt her shrink from him, again he felt another presence between them, and the jealous devil, so lately laid, once more took possession of his soul.

He thrust her away. ‘I had better go now,’ he said hoarsely. ‘It’s no use. You were right: we had better not meet again.’

And as Penelope, swept with infinite distress, compelled, mastered, by impulses the source of which was wholly hidden from herself, came once more near to him, again took his hand in hers, looked up mutely

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into his face, he said roughly, 'No, no! keep your kisses for the other man; I will not rob him any more!' and, fumbling for a moment with the key in the lock, was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

'For a pint of honey thou shalt here likely find a gallon of gaul, for a dram of pleasure a pound of pain, for an inch of mirth an ell of mone: as Ivie doth an oke, these miseries encompass our life.'

I

AFTER her return from Kingpole Farm that night of stress and storm, Penelope felt strangely, terribly forlorn. Those about her seemed changed. She gradually became aware that she was being watched, considered anxiously, by her mother, by Wantley, even by Miss Wake. Cecily alone among them seemed as she had always been, but even she, or so Mrs. Robinson suspected, had gone through some experience which she was keeping secret from the woman who knew herself so well and loyally loved by her.

As the time grew near when Miss Wake and her niece were to go back to town, leaving Penelope alone with her mother and with her cousin, there came over Mrs. Robinson an overmastering desire to recall Downing to Monk's Eype; she longed for the protection which would be afforded her by his presence. She also wished him to confirm her in the conviction that the time had come when Lady Wantley should be told of what they were about to do.

For the first time the gravity, the irrevocable nature, of the step she was taking came home to Penelope's mind, to her heart—especially after her agonizing

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interview with Winfrith—and even to her conscience, for she acknowledged a duty to her mother.

During these days of suspense Mrs. Robinson became 'gey ill to live with,' and the two who suffered most from her moods were Mrs. Mote and Cecily Wake. Penelope half suspected her old nurse of treachery, and sometimes she would give her a peculiar, and Motey felt it to be also a terrible, look. The old servant was a brave woman, but during that time of silent, fearful waiting her spirit often quailed, and she sometimes bitterly regretted having spoken to Lady Wantley.

To Cecily her friend's capricious moods were a source of pained bewilderment. Penelope no longer drew, no longer painted, no longer, indeed, did anything but walk and drive. She seemed to have a fear of solitude, and yet the girl was the only companion whom she tolerated.

Sometimes the two would drive in the broad, low pony-cart for hours, with scarce a word said on either side. At other times Mrs. Robinson would talk with her wonted impetuosity and sharp decision of many things and people of moment to Cecily. She would refer to her brief married life at the Settlement, even to her childhood and David Winfrith. Then would come bitter, slighting words concerning those whom the speaker knew to be dear to her listener, sarcastic references to enthusiastic Philip Hammond and large-minded, kindly Mrs. Pomfret; even — then Cecily Wake's heart would whisper that this was surely cruel — her cousin Wantley would be ruthlessly dissected, and his foibles held up to scorn.

There would come moments when Penelope again was kind, when she would say a word implying that Cecily Wake was her best, her most intimate, friend; but this was now often followed by a sentence which seemed to tell of an approaching break in their friendship, of coming separation.

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Soon the two, the woman and the girl, were at utter variance the one with the other, and Cecily suffered almost as keenly as did Penelope. It seemed to her only too clear that Mrs. Robinson grudged her, and disapproved of, Wantley's love. What else could mean her strange, obliquely stabbing phrases?

Cecily's mind often reverted to that most moving, sacred hour when Wantley had given her his mother's pearls, when he had told her, dryly and yet tenderly, of how truly he loved her. He had said—she remembered the words, and, so remembering, often let her eyes fall before those of her friend—'Unless you particularly wish to do so, I should prefer that you say nothing—just now, at once—to Penelope. Wait till I have spoken to your aunt, till we are both in London, till we are ready to tell all the world.' And, of course, she had assented, while yet feeling sure of Mrs. Robinson's real sympathy.

But now Cecily felt sure no longer, and over her heart there came something very like despair. How could she, Cecily Wake, who owed so much—nay, her very acquaintance with Wantley—to Penelope, go against her in so serious a matter? Cecily had retained the clear conscience, free of all casuistry, of a child. She knew that she loved Wantley with all her heart, that her feeling for him was no longer under her own control; but she also knew that she could never marry him in direct opposition to the wishes of the one human being to whom she regarded herself as indebted for all which made life worth living.

And so her happiness became quite overshadowed with misgivings and hesitations, of which she said nothing to her lover.

This reticence was made easy by Wantley's own conduct. With a punctiliousness which did him honour, he scorned to take any advantage of their hidden understanding. For many reasons he had preferred that their formal engagement should take

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place; and be publicly announced, in London. Meanwhile, he felt infinitely content, and in no haste to provoke the elder Miss Wake's tremulous, incredulous satisfaction, or to receive his cousin's ironical congratulations.

There are moments in almost every life when a man feels himself lifted far above his usual plane of thought and feeling, when he knows he is happily adrift from familiar moorings.

Such a moment had now come to Wantley. He would ask himself, with a certain exultation of heart, whether it were possible that a time could come when he would feel any nearer, ever more intimately linked, to his beloved, to this young and still mysterious creature, the tips of whose fingers he had not even kissed, and who, as he well knew, and was glad to know, lived in a spiritual sense in a world so far removed from that in which he had always dwelt.

He trembled at his own good fortune, and would fain have propitiated that sportive Fate which lies in wait for those to whom Providence has been too kind. So feeling, he told himself that he should not grudge Penelope the present companionship of Cecily. He divined something of his cousin's unhappiness and unrest, though far from suspecting their intensity, and so the gradual shadowing of Cecily's face was attributed by him to her hourly contact with one who was obviously ill at ease and sick at heart.

On the last day of Theresa Wake's stay at Monk's Eype, Mrs. Robinson quite unexpectedly and most capriciously, or so it seemed to the older lady, expressed a sudden wish that the aunt and niece should stay on for another two or three days.

So eager was Penelope to compass the matter that she actually sought out Miss Wake in the early morning before she was up and dressed. 'Pray, Cousin

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Theresa, stay on a little longer! Do not go to-morrow. This is the sixth—stay on till the ninth. We are all leaving on Saturday.’ She added, after a scarcely perceptible pause: ‘Sir George Downing is coming back to-day.’

But Miss Wake’s answer was very decided, and not very gracious in expression. Was it fancy that made Mrs. Robinson feel that the few words were uttered very coldly? ‘No; we cannot alter our plans at this late hour, Mrs. Pomfret is expecting Cecily back to-morrow evening. We must certainly leave in the morning, and you will be able to spare us very well.’

II

There came a time when Wantley often debated painfully as to why he had lent himself to the bringing back of Downing to Monk’s Eype, and when he was glad to remember that he had said a word of protest to his cousin. Penelope had chosen him to be her messenger; his had been the task of taking her invitation to Kingpole Farm.

Mrs. Robinson had tried to treat the matter with Wantley as of no moment. He had listened in silence, and then reluctantly had said: ‘I will go if you really wish it, but I think you are not acting wisely;’ only to be disarmed by the look of suffering, almost of despair, which had met his measured words.

And so he had taken the letter which had summoned Downing to her side. ‘I beg you to come back for two or three days,’ she wrote. ‘Things have not been going well with me. I need your help. I feel that before leaving here I ought to inform my mother of my—of our—intentions.’

In later life Wantley sometimes recalled that last visit to Kingpole Farm.

During the long solitary drive he had wondered uneasily if he was expected—if this little episode

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had been arranged between Mrs. Robinson and the man with whom he was beginning to believe his cousin was indeed more closely connected than he liked to think possible. But at once he had seen that Downing knew nothing—that he, Wantley, had not been expected, indeed, was not welcome. Downing struck him as aged, sombre, perhaps even defiant, as he held out his lean brown hand for Penelope's note. While reading it he had turned away, treating his visitor with scant ceremony, then had said briefly, 'I understand I am to come back with you—now—to-day?' And Wantley had as shortly assented.

Perforce—this also he later remembered time and again—Wantley was present at the meeting of Penelope and Downing.

The two men found her standing by the open door, her tall figure outlined against the hall, the sunny terrace, the belt of blue sea beyond. She was looking out landward, shading her eyes—sunken, grey-lidded with much sleeplessness, perhaps with tears—from the bright light.

Without waiting for the high phaeton to stop, Downing had sprung out, and striding forward had taken her two hands in his. For a moment they seemed unaware of Wantley's presence; they exchanged no conventional word of greeting. Then, slowly, and with a deep sigh, Penelope withdrew her hands from the other's grasp, and observed, quite collectedly, that the Beach Room had been arranged, as before, to serve as study for her guest.

A moment later she had turned and gone, out through the hall, on to the terrace, leaving her cousin to play once more the part of host—but this time of reluctant host—to Persian Downing.

It was night. Wantley's light alone burnt brightly on the lower floor of the villa. The group of five people—for Lady Wantley had not come down to

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dinner—had broken up curiously early, Downing retreating to the Beach Room, Miss Wake upstairs, while Penelope, Cecily, and Wantley himself, after a short walk through the dark pine-wood, had also separated.

For awhile he tried to read and smoke, but soon he put down his book, and lay back in the large, deep chair, and thought of what he should do if——

Wantley had a great dislike to interfering in other people's business—in fact, he prided himself on never offering unasked advice, on never spoiling a game in which he was not taking a hand.

Well, what he was now doing savoured of interference. Still, it was his business, and his only, if he chose to outstay from bed his fellow-guests. After all, he had a perfect right to sit up on this, the last night of Cecily Wake's stay at Monk's Eype—the young man's face softened; on this, the first night of Downing's return—his face grew stern, his eyes alert.

If Downing, coming up from the Beach Room at one or two in the morning, met Penelope—well, scarcely by appointment, but by accident—in the studio, would it not be better for them both to be aware that he, Wantley, was there sitting up, almost next door? To make them aware of it might be a certain difficulty, but that could be managed if he now got up and left the door of the smoking-room ajar. He did so, treading softly across the matted floor.

A sudden sound made him start, but it was only a shutter, not, as he had thought, a door opening and closing.

Again he took up his book—a much annotated French edition of the Confessions of Saint Augustine—and he lighted another cigarette. It was now only eleven. There were hours to be got through, and if—as he believed had sometimes occurred before—Sir George Downing elected to stay in the Beach Room

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all night, then he, poor Wantley, must yet keep his bargain with himself, and sit doggedly on.

There was always one most disagreeable possibility—that which, to tell the truth, he really feared—namely, that Penelope might be seized with the idea of going down to the Beach Room, of seeking out Downing there. If he heard her coming down the silent house; if he heard her opening the door which led from the hall on to the terrace, then certainly he would, and must, break his cherished rule of non-interference. But the thought that this ordeal perhaps lay before him did not add to the pleasure of his vigil.

III

At half-past eleven Wantley heard that which he had feared to hear, the sound of steps coming down the marble staircase. He got up from his chair, very slowly, very reluctantly. There came the murmur of low voices, and the listener's ear caught Cecily's low, even tones answering Penelope's eager, whispering voice.

'What a relief,' the voice was saying—'what a relief to get away from upstairs—from Motey next door! Here we shall be quite alone——' Then, with surprise, but no annoyance: 'Why, there's a light in Ludovic's smoking-room! But he's very discreet. He would never intrude on a dressing-gown conference.'

And the voices swept on, past the door ajar, on into the short passage which led to the studio.

Wantley sat down again with a very altered feeling. He was ashamed of his former fears, and at that moment begged his cousin's pardon for suspicions which he trusted she would never know he had entertained.

Cecily asleep, dreaming sad dreams, had suddenly

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wakened to see Penelope standing by the side of her bed.

The tall, ghostlike figure, clad in a long pale-grey dressing-gown, held a small lamp in her hand; and, as the girl opened her eyes, bent down and whispered, 'I could not sleep, and so I thought we might have one last talk. Not here—for we might wake Cousin Theresa; not in my room—for there Motey can hear every word—but downstairs in the studio, if you are not afraid of the cold.'

And so they had made their way through the unlighted house, Cecily's smaller figure wrapped in pale blue and white, her fair hair spread over her shoulders, looking, so her companion in tender mood assured her, like one of Fra Angelico's heavenly visitants.

When in the studio, Penelope put the lamp down on her painting-table and drew the girl over to the broad couch where Cecily had sat down and waited for her, just a month ago, on the afternoon of her first day at Monk's Eype. The knowledge of how happy she had then been, of how beautiful she had thought this room, now full of dim, mysterious sadness, came back to the girl with a pang of pain. She looked round with troubled eyes, but Mrs. Robinson, an elbow on her knee, her chin resting in her left hand, caught nothing of this look, for she was staring out through the dark uncurtained window, absorbed in her own thoughts.

At last she slowly turned her head.

'Cecily,' she said, and her voice sounded curiously strained, 'you must have thought me odd of late, and even sometimes not kind. And yet, my dear, I love you very well.'

'I know,' said Cecily, speaking with difficulty; 'I have understood.'

'You have understood?' Mrs. Robinson looked at her with quick suspicion, and her face hardened. 'Do you mean that my affairs have been discussed?

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What have you heard? What have you understood?’

‘Your feeling as to Lord Wantley—and myself.’ Cecily’s voice sank, but she spoke very steadily, a little coldly. Surely Penelope might have spared her this utterance.

But the other had heard the slow, reluctant words with a feeling of remorse and relief.

‘Why, Cecily!’ she cried, and as she spoke she put her arm round the girl’s shoulders, ‘did you think—did you believe, that I could feel anything but glad? Why, when I first saw how things were going, I could hardly believe in Ludovic’s good fortune.’ She added, half to herself, ‘in his good taste! You are a thousand times too good for him; but he knows that well enough. Of course, I knew he had spoken to you; but as you did not tell me——’ There was a note of reproach in Penelope’s voice. ‘How strange, how amazing, that you should have understood me so little! For the last few days,’ she sighed a sharp, short sigh, ‘my only really happy, comfortable moments have been spent in thinking of you and of Ludovic.’

She stopped speaking abruptly, but kept her arm round the girl’s shoulder. Cecily had time to wonder why she herself felt so far from content; surely the kind words just uttered should have filled her with joy and peace?

‘Tell me,’ she said, and as she spoke she fixed her eyes imploringly on her companion’s face, taking unconscious note of Penelope’s rigid mouth and stern, contracted brows—‘do tell me why you are so unhappy! I would not ask you if I did not care for you so much.’

‘Am I unhappy? Do I seem unhappy?’ Mrs. Robinson looked fixedly at the questioner as if really seeking an answer. She got up suddenly, walked to the end of the long room and back, then came and stood before Cecily.

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‘ Well, Cecily, I will tell you, for you deserve to know the truth. I am unhappy, if indeed I am so, because I am about to do a thing of which almost everyone who knows me—in fact, I might say every-one who knows me—will disapprove. Also, it is a thing which will separate me from all those I love and esteem, both in a material sense—for I am going very far away—and in a spiritual sense.’

Penelope sank down on her knees, and placed her hands so that they clasped and covered those of Cecily Wake. ‘ In your heaven, my dear, there may be found a place for me—after a long stay, I imagine, in purgatory; but there will be no room in mamma’s heaven, especially not in that where she believes my father to be. David Winfrith also will consign me to outer darkness, and that of a very horrible kind. Still I would give up willingly all hope of future heaven, Cecily, if only I could conciliate them here—if only they would sympathize with what I am about to do.’

Cecily looked down on the lovely face turned up to hers with a feeling of pity and terror. ‘ What do you mean?’ she said. ‘ I am sure you would never do anything which would make your mother love you less.’

‘ I believe there are people ’—Penelope was speaking quietly, as if to herself—‘ to whom what I am going to do would appear to be perfectly right, and, indeed, commendable. But then, you see, I do not know those people, so the thought of them brings no comfort.’

She waited a moment, rose from her knees, and again sat down on the couch. She felt ashamed of her emotion, and forced herself into calmness, her voice into measured tones: ‘ I am going away with Sir George Downing, back with him to Persia, to Teheran. We hope to be always together, never apart till death takes one of us. I have even pro-

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mised him that I will not return to England, excepting, of course, with him.'

'But I thought, I understood——' Cecily looked anxiously at her friend.

'You think rightly, you have understood the truth. Sir George Downing has a wife. They have been married many years, and separated almost as many.'

'But if he is married,' said Cecily slowly, 'how can you go away with him like that?'

Mrs. Robinson thought Cecily strangely dull of understanding. 'Surely you have heard of such occurrences?' she said impatiently.

'Oh, yes,' answered the girl, and her eyes filled with tears, which ran down her cheeks unheeded. 'You mean St. Mary Magdalen, Penelope? And others, later——'

Mrs. Robinson again got up. 'Surely,' she cried, 'you can understand how it is with me? You love Ludovic—supposing that you suddenly heard, now, that he was married—what would you do?—how would you feel?'

But Cecily, looking at her in dumb, agonized distress, made no answer.

'You are too kind to say so, but I know quite well what you would do. You would go away, and never see him again. It might kill you, but you would never do what you believed to be wrong.'

'Wrong for him, too,' the girl said, with difficulty.

'Well, I am not good, like you. If I had hesitated—and Cecily, believe me, I never did so, not for a moment—it would have been owing to mean, worldly considerations——'

'Do you, then, love him so very much?'

'Ah, my dear! Listen, Cecily, and I will tell you of our first meeting. It was in the Gare de Lyon, when we—Motey and I—were on our way to Pol les Thermes. I lost my purse, and he came forward, offered to lend me what I needed. Should I'—

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Penelope's voice altered, became curiously introspective, questioning—'should I have taken money from a stranger?' And then as Cecily looked at her, amazed, 'I tell you that from the moment our eyes met we *knew* one another in a more real sense than many lovers do after years of communion. My unhappiness the last few days has come from his absence, from the knowledge, too, that we are both to be tormented, as I am now being tormented—by you.' And, as Cecily made a gesture of protest, 'Yes, my dear, by you! Why, he has also been attacked by old Mr. Gumberg, of all people in the world!'

Penelope laughed nervously. She took the girl by the arm, and silently they retraced their footsteps through the quiet house—the silence broken at intervals by Cecily's long sighing sobs.

Some moments later, Wantley, going up to bed with uneasy mind, for he had heard the sound of Cecily's distress, met his cousin face to face. A white cloak concealed her figure, and a black silk hood her resplendent hair.

They looked at one another for a moment. Then very deliberately he spread out his arms, barring the way. 'You cannot, shall not go down to the Beach Room!' he whispered.

'I must, and shall!' she said. 'You do not understand, I must see him—you can come and wait for me if you like.'

But Wantley was merciless. He looked at her till her eyes fell before his—till she turned and slowly went up before him, back into her room.

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CHAPTER XVII

'O mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps, levons l'ancre.
Le pays nous ennuie, O mort, appareillons.'

BAUDELAIRE.

'J'ai vécu: c'est à dire j'ai travaillé, j'ai aimé, j'ai souffert.'
Old French Epitaph.

I

THE next morning Cecily Wake and her aunt left Monk's Eype. Strange, unhappy morning! during which Mrs. Robinson alone preserved her usual indifferent, haughty serenity of manner, though she also, when her face was in repose, looked weary and sad.

Wantley had found Penelope and her two guests, all three cloaked and hatted, sitting at the pretty breakfast-table laden with early September fruit and flowers. His half-suggestion that he should drive the travellers to the distant junction where they were to catch the fast train to town was at once negatived by Penelope. 'I am going with them,' she said shortly, 'and I shall have business at Burcombe which will keep me till the afternoon.'

Wantley bit his lip. What sort of day would he, Lady Wantley, and Downing, spend together? He felt angry with his cousin for having exposed them to such an ordeal. Then the elder Miss Wake asked him some insignificant question concerning the journey which lay before her, and he began speaking, going on, as it seemed to himself, aimlessly and endlessly, hardly waiting for the old lady's vague, nervous answers, while intensely, agonizingly, conscious of Cecily's quiet figure opposite, of her pale face and stricken eyes.

At last the meal which had seemed to him so inter-

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minably long came to an end, and they all went into the hall, where Lady Wantley was walking slowly up and down, waiting to bid farewell to her kinswomen, and looking, as the young man saw with a certain resentment, quite unconscious of the storms which had passed over the little company of people now gathered about her.

As Mrs. Robinson placed herself in the carriage, by the side of her old cousin, she turned to Wantley, and said deliberately, as if giving challenge: 'Sir George Downing will lunch in the Beach Room. He leaves to-night, and of course I shall be back before he starts.'

Wantley made no answer. He was engaged in drawing the rug across Cecily's knees; as he did so he felt her hand quiver a moment under his, and there came over him an eager impulse to go with her, to comfort her—above all, to shut himself off with her from all this tragic business, which apparently neither he nor she could affect or modify.

Penelope again spoke. 'You, Ludovic, will of course lunch with mamma?' He answered: 'Yes, of course, of course!' Looking straight at his cousin, he could not help adding: 'No one shall disturb Sir George Downing till your return.' And then—not till then—a wave of colour reddened Penelope's oval face from brow to chin.

II

And so they had gone, and Wantley, turning away, back into the hall, felt a great depression—a feeling of utter weariness—come upon him. It was with an unreasonable and unreasoning irritation that he saw Lady Wantley walking slowly, with her peculiar leisurely grace of movement, into the great Picture Room, there to take up her accustomed position by the ivory inlaid table on which lay her books and blotting-pad.

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'People when they reach that age,' he said to himself, 'have their emotions, their feelings of love and pride, mercifully deadened.' But, all the same, fearing what she might say to him, he did not follow her, but instead, slipping his hands into his pockets, and pushing his straw hat down over his eyes, made his way out of doors.

But there, in the clear September sunshine, cooled by the keen sea-wind, he felt, if anything, even more ill at ease. Every flagstone of the terrace, every bend of the path leading down to the pine-wood and to the ilex-grove, reminded him of delicious moments spent with Cecily. He felt a pang of sharp self-pity, blaming Penelope, even more blaming Providence, for the spoiling of his idyl. 'After last night,' he said to himself, 'Cecily will never again be quite the same, bless her!' And so, walking very slowly, his eyes bent on the ground, he gave himself up actively to dislike and condemnation of his cousin.

Wantley was an intensely proud man. Perhaps because he had nothing personally to be proud of, he took the more intense, if not very justifiable, pride in his unsullied name, in his respectable lineage, even in the fine traditions left by his predecessor. From boyhood he had acted according to the theory, 'If I do nothing good or worthy, I will yet avoid what is evil and unworthy.' And to this not very exalted ideal of conduct he had remained faithful.

True, Penelope, whatever his griefs against her, would give him and the world no right to despise her. Condemn her wrong-headedness, her selfishness, he was free to do; but he knew well enough how far heavier would have been his condemnation had he discovered that his cousin had become in secret Downing's mistress. But the knowledge that this would never have been possible, brought to-day but scant consolation; indeed, Wantley found it in his heart to wish that Penelope had been more akin to

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some of the women whom he and she had known, and to whose frailties she had always extended a haughty tolerance.

Yet he told himself that he understood her point of view. After all, she was her own mistress, in the matter of herself owing none but that same self a duty. But this was not so—ah no, indeed!—in the matter of her name and of her good repute: those belonged not only to her own self, but also to others, some dead, some living, and some—so Wantley now reminded himself—to come.

In happier, more careless days, when he had been so discontented and dissatisfied with the way his life had shaped itself, the young man had lamented his small circle of friends and acquaintances, and he had envied his contemporaries their school and college friends; but now, to-day, it seemed to him that he knew and was known to all the world—that is, to the world whose good opinion he naturally valued.

He looked into the future, and realized with shame and anger what would be said by the kind and by the unkind, by the evil-mind and by the prudish, in the boudoirs and in the smoking-rooms, when it became known that Mrs. Robinson, Penelope Wantley—the Perdita of a younger, idler hour—had ‘gone off’ with Persian Downing!

Then he thought, with bitter amusement, of how this same news would be received by the good people—and, on the whole, he had to admit that they were good people—who had circled round his uncle and aunt in the days when he himself was a moody, neglected youth, and Penelope a lovely and engaging, if wayward, child.

The motley crowd of pietists, some few eccentric, the majority intensely commonplace, who had attended year after year the religious conferences which had made the name of Marston Lydiate known to the whole religious world, would doubtless think it

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their duty to address letters of sympathy and of condolence to Penelope's mother, even—hateful thought!—to himself.

Then his mind turned once more to his cousin. What sort of life would be Penelope's after she had cut herself adrift from her own world? How would this proud, spoilt woman, who had always kept herself singularly apart from all that was unsavoury, endure the slights which would inevitably be put on one who, however much the fact might be cloaked and disguised, could never be the wife of her companion?

Penelope was not a child, to adapt herself to new conditions. Would strange, self-centred Persian Downing compensate her for all she was about to lose? Would this maker of great schemes, this seer of visions, forget himself, in order to be everything to her? For a few moments Wantley, leaning on the low wall which separated the ilex-grove from the cliff overhanging the sea, thought only of Penelope, and of what her life would be if this tragic affair shaped itself in the way that he believed to be now inevitable.

The day he had accompanied her to town, during the long railway journey back to Dorset, Lady Wantley had spoken to him mysteriously as to advice proffered by Mr. Gumberg. She had seemed to think that if all else failed he, Wantley, should speak to Sir George Downing, but to this he had in no way assented.

He turned, and slowly made his way through the pine-trees. The day—nay, even the morning—had to be lived through, and his thoughts were intolerable company—so much so, indeed, that he felt he would prefer to go and find Lady Wantley, and stay with her a while, although he was aware that she would in all probability urge him to interfere. The knowledge that he would have to tell her he could not and would not do so smote him painfully.

Downing and Penelope were not children whose

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wayward steps could be stayed, with whom at last force could replace argument. A braver than he might well hesitate to face the contemptuous indignation of the eccentric, powerful man, for whom Wantley even now felt kindness and respect, reserving, unjustly enough, his greatest blame for the woman.

No, no! If Lady Wantley besought his intervention, he must tell her that in this matter he could not hope to succeed where Mr. Gumberg had apparently failed.

III

As Wantley walked along the terrace in front of the villa, past the opened windows of the Picture Room, he saw Lady Wantley sitting in her usual place. But there was about her figure, especially about her hands, which clasped and unclasped themselves across her knee, an unusual look of tension and emotion.

Wantley turned, and drew nearer to the window which seemed to frame the still graceful figure. But she remained quite unconscious that she was being watched. He saw that her lips were moving; he heard her speaking, as she so often did, to herself; and there came to him the conviction that she had been down to the Beach Room, that she had seen Downing, that she had made to him an appeal foredoomed to failure.

A keen desire to know whether he guessed truly, and, if so, to know what had actually taken place, warred for a moment with the young man's horror of a scene, and especially of a scene with Lady Wantley in one of her strange moods.

Suddenly she raised her voice, and he heard clearly the words, uttered in low, intense tones, and as if in answer to an invisible questioner: 'But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour to slay him with guile, thou shalt take him from My altar, that he may die.'

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'It must have been horribly painful,' said the listener to himself. He began to pity Downing.

Familiarity had bred in Wantley, not contempt, but a certain indulgent pity not far removed from contempt, for what he and Mrs. Robinson, seeing eye to eye in this one matter, regarded as Lady Wantley's peculiar and slightly absurd religious vagaries. Dimly aware of this attitude, of this lack of respect for what were to herself vital truths, Lady Wantley, when in their presence, exercised greater self-control than either of them ever guessed.

But now, for the moment, she was in no condition to restrain herself; and though, as he opened the door of the Picture Room, she looked round for a moment, she still continued talking aloud in apparently eager argument with some unseen presence. 'Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.'

She spoke with increasing excitement, and with what seemed to the hearer a strange exultation.

He stopped short, and, retracing his footsteps, closed the door. It had always been tacitly agreed between himself and his cousin that Penelope's household should hear as little as was possible of Lady Wantley in these, her wilder moods.

Again he went towards her. As he did so, she stood up and advanced to meet him. Her pale face was on a level with his own; her grey eyes were dilated. Something had stirred her far more deeply than she was wont to be stirred by material things. She looked, Wantley thought, inspired, exhilarated, as one might look on emerging triumphantly from some awful ordeal.

As he gazed at her there came to him the hope, the almost incredulous hope, that she—the mother—had prevailed; that her words, even if winged with what seemed madness, had been so eloquent as to convince Downing that what he was about to do was an evil

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thing, one out of which no good could come to the woman he loved.

'Then you have seen him?' he asked in a low voice, and, as he spoke, he took Lady Wantley's hand in his own.

She made a scarcely perceptible movement of assent. 'Thy right hand, O Lord, has become righteous in power. Thy right hand, O Lord, has dashed in pieces the enemy.'

Her voice faltered, and her tall figure swayed forward.

'Sit down,' he said quickly, 'and tell me what happened. Were you able to make any impression on his mind?'

But as she sank back into her chair she answered vaguely, and her head fell forward on her breast. 'You ask me what happened?' She waited a moment, and then added, with what seemed a cry: 'He said, "The woman tempts me, and I shall eat!"'

'I do not think that he can have said that to you,' said Wantley gently. 'Think again. Try and remember exactly what he did say.'

'It was tantamount to that,' she answered, lifting her head and looking at him fixedly. 'He—he admitted I spoke the truth, yet declared he owed himself to her.' She hesitated, then whispered: 'I warned him of his way, he took no heed, he died in his iniquity, and his blood will not be required of mine hand.'

Even before she had uttered these last words an awful suspicion, a sick dread, had forced itself on Wantley's mind. He passed his hand over his face, afraid lest she should see written there his fear—indeed, his all but knowledge—of what she had done.

There was but a moment to make up his mind what he should say and what he should do. On his present action much might depend. In any case, he must

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soothe her, restore her to calmness. And so, 'We must now think,' he said authoritatively, 'of Penelope.' He waited a moment, and then repeated again the one word, 'Penelope.'

Lady Wantley's mouth quivered for the first time, and her eyes contracted with a look of suffering.

But he did not give her time to speak. 'No one knows—no one must know, for the sake of Penelope.'

Slowly she bent her head in assent, and he went on, in a low, warning voice. 'If you say a word—I mean of what has just taken place—the truth concerning Penelope and Sir George Downing will become known to all men.' Half unconsciously Wantley adapted the phraseology likely to reach most bindingly the over-excited, distraught brain of the woman over whose figure he was bending, into whose face he was gazing so searchingly.

He felt every moment to be precious, to be big with hideous possibilities, but he feared to leave her—feared to go before he felt quite sure he had made her understand that her daughter's reputation was bound to suffer, if she—Lady Wantley—in any way imperilled or incriminated herself.

'You will wait here, will you not, till I come to you?' he said anxiously. 'And if you see anyone, you will not speak? you will remain absolutely silent, for the sake of your daughter, of poor Penelope?'

He waited until she had again bent her head in assent, and then turned and left her, passing through the window on to the terrace, and so swiftly on, down through the wood, to the rough track leading to the shore.

As he jumped down on to the beach, both feet sinking deeply through the soft dry sand above the water-line, he paused a moment, and, looking round him, felt suddenly reassured, ashamed of the unreasoning

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dread which had come over him when listening to Lady Wantley's stange, wildly-uttered words.

The tide was only just beginning to turn, and the sea, in gentle mood, came and went to within a few feet of the Beach Room, of which the blank wall jutted out on to his right.

The absolute peace and quietude which lay about him soothed Wantley's nerves, and he walked round, below the wide-open window, of which the sill was just on a level with his head, with steady feet.

Then, taking up a stone, he knocked on the heavy wooden door, half expecting, wholly hoping, to hear in immediate response a deep-toned 'Come in.' But there came no such answer, and once more he knocked more loudly; he waited a few moments while vague fear again assailed him, and then, turning the handle, he walked into the Beach Room.

At first he only saw that the chair, set before the broad table covered with papers, was without an occupant. But gradually, and not quite at once—or so it seemed to him looking back—he became aware that in the shadow of the table, stretched angularly across the floor, lay Sir George Downing, dead.

Standing there, with the horror of what he saw growing on him, Wantley had not a moment of real doubt, of wild hope that this might not be death. Still, as he knelt down and brought himself to touch, to move, that which lay there, he suddenly became aware of a fact which would have laid any such doubt, for above Downing's right ear was a wound——

With a quick sigh Wantley, trembling, rose from his knees. In spite of himself, his mind vividly reconstituted the scene which must have taken place. First, the sudden appearance of the unexpected, unwelcome visitor; then the vision of Downing, with his old-fashioned courtesy, giving up the more comfortable chair, while he himself took that in which he, Wantley, had sat a short week ago; finally—the

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corner of the wide table only separating the two adversaries—after the exchange of a very few words, slow, decisive, on either side—the fatal shot.

The revolver which Wantley remembered having seen pinning the map of Persia to the table, now lay as it had doubtless fallen from the delicate, steady hand which had believed itself divinely guided to accomplish its work of death.

Even now he found time to realize with poignant pain, and yet with a certain relief, that such a man as had once been he now lying stretched out at his feet could certainly, had he cared to do so, have stayed, or at least deviated, the course of the weapon, and later on this knowledge brought Wantley comfort.

But he had no leisure now to give to such reasoning and, slipping the bolt in the door, he again stooped over the dead man.

What he was about to do was intolerably repugnant to him, and as, after a moment's pause, he thrust his hand into the old-fashioned pockets, turned back the coat, sought eagerly for what it was so essential he should find, he felt the sweat break out all over his body. But, to his dismay, there seemed to be no keys, either loose in the various pockets, or attached to the heavy gold chain, which terminated with a bunch of old seals and a repeater watch.

Wantley was turning away, half relieved to be spared the task he had set himself, when something strange and enigmatical struck him in the ashen, lined face, the wide-open, sightless eyes, from which he had till now averted his glance.

During the performance of what had been to him a hateful task, and after having so turned the head as to conceal the wound above the right ear, he had been at some pains to leave the body exactly as it had fallen. But in the course of his search he had been compelled to shift the position of the dead man's arms, and he now saw that Downing's right hand, lying across his

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breast, seemed to be pointing—to what was it pointing? Again the seeker stooped—nay, this time he knelt down; and at once he found what he had sought for so fruitlessly, for under the palm of the dead hand, in an inner waistcoat pocket, which had before escaped him, lay a small key.

For the first time Wantley bared his head, and a curious impulse came over him. ‘You will forgive me,’ he said, not loudly, but in a whisper, ‘you will pardon, for her sake, for your poor Penelope’s sake, what I have been compelled to do?’

And then heavy-hearted, full of fear and foreboding, he made his way back, up the rough track, so through the pine-wood, to the villa, mercifully spared on the way the ordeal of meeting, and having perchance to speak with, another human being.

Quickly he passed by the window where Lady Wantley was still sitting, up the shallow staircase leading from the hall to the upper stories of Monk’s Eype, and so on to the room, close to his own, where, with pleasant anticipation of an agreeable friendship with his cousin’s famous guest, he had ushered Downing the first night of his stay, just a month ago.

It was, as he now reminded himself, a month to a day, for that first meeting had been on the seventh of August, the eve of his, Wantley’s own birthday, and this now was the seventh of September.

Wantley singled out at once a large red despatch-box as probably containing what he sought. The key he held in his hand clicked in the lock, and he saw, almost filling up the top compartment, a plain, old-fashioned leather jewel-case which contained more than he expected to find of moment to himself. There, smiling up at him, lay the baby face of Penelope, a miniature which he recognized as one that had been painted to be a surprise gift from Lady Wantley to her husband on their child’s second birthday, and which had always stood on Lord Wantley’s table.

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'She should not have given him that!' was the young man's involuntary thought.

Instinctively he averted his eyes from the slender bundle of letters on which the miniature had lain. But, as he lifted them out, together with his cousin's portrait, he saw that they had served to conceal a sheet of note-paper—a piece of old-fashioned, highly-glazed note-paper, deeply edged with black—lying open across the bottom of the jewel-case. As he glanced at the first few words, 'The Queen commands me to request that you——' ah, poor Downing! For a moment Wantley hesitated; he had meant only to withdraw what concerned Penelope, but finally he laid everything—the summons to Balmoral, the letters written in the bold, pointed handwriting Wantley knew so well, the little miniature—back in the jewel-case, which he then locked away in his own room next door.

IV

The hours that followed he remembered in later life as a man may do a period of delirium, or as a bad dream which he has dreamed innumerable times.

He became horribly familiar with the tale he had to tell.

Each person interested had to be informed of how he had gone down into the hall, whence, finding two letters for Sir George Downing, he had made his way across the terrace, down the steps leading to the shore, noticing as he went a little pleasure boat which had drifted fast out of sight.

Then had to follow the recital of his fruitless knocking at the Beach Room door, followed by his dreadful discovery—the sight of one who had been his honoured guest lying dead, the death-wound above the right ear having been obviously caused by a revolver which had been left on the table, close to where the body had fallen.

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Wantley also had to describe his return to the villa, the breaking of the awful news to Lady Wantley, the sending for the doctor and for the police from Wyke Regis, followed by a time of long waiting—for, of course, he had allowed no one to touch the body—first for the police (his letter remained for a while unopened at the station), and then for his cousin, Mrs. Robinson, who was fortunately away when the first awful discovery was made.

Such had been the story Wantley had to tell innumerable times—first, to the various people who had a right to know all that could be known; secondly, to the numerous folk, whose interest, if idle, was eager and real, and whom he felt a nervous desire to conciliate, and to make believe his version of an affair which became more than a nine days' wonder.

After the bearing of the great mental strain, especially after the accomplishment of a prolonged mental task, the mind—ay, and even the body—refuse to be stilled, and call imperatively for something else to do, to go on doing. When at last the doctor had come and gone, when the first discussion with the local police had come to an end—in a word, when Wantley had repeated some five or six times the grim, simple facts to all those whom it concerned—there came to him the most painful ordeal of all, the hours spent by him in waiting for Penelope's return.

After he had taken Lady Wantley up to her room, and left her there in what he trusted would remain a strange state of bewildered coma, he had come down to wander restlessly through the large rooms on the ground-floor of the villa.

His mind was clouded with grotesque and sinister images, and he welcomed such interruptions as were caused by the futile, scared questions of those among the upper servants who from time to time summoned up courage to come and speak to him.

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While trying to occupy himself by writing letters, which he almost invariably at once destroyed after he had written them, Wantley was ever asking himself with sick anxiety, if he had done all that was in his power to protect and safeguard the two women to whom he had never felt so closely linked as now. He was haunted by the fear that he himself might unwittingly reveal what he believed to be the truth, but he would have been comforted indeed had he known how his mere outward appearance, his imperturbable face, his sleepy eyes, even his well-trimmed beard, now served his purpose. Outwardly Wantley appeared to be that day the calmest man at Monk's Eype, only so far discreetly perturbed as would naturally be any kindly and good-hearted host, whose guest had met, while under his roof, with so awful and mysterious a fate.

A curious interlude in his long waiting was the sudden irruption of Penelope's old nurse. Motey found him sitting at the writing-table of what had been his predecessor's study, attempting, for the tenth time, to compose the letter which he knew must be written that night to Mr. Julius Gumberg.

As the old woman came in, carefully closing the door behind her, he looked up and saw that the streaky apple-red had faded from the firm round cheeks, and yet—and yet her look was one of only half-concealed triumph, not of distress or fear. For a moment they gazed at one another fixedly, then 'Is it true,' she asked briefly; 'is it really true, Mr. Ludovic? I was minded to go down and see for myself, but I'm told there's the police people down there, and I thought maybe I'd better not meddle.'

'Yes,' he said rather sternly, 'it is quite true. An awful thing, Motey, to have happened here, in your mistress's house!' He felt impelled to add these words, revolted by the look of relief, almost of joy, in the woman's pale face.

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Then into his mind there shot a sudden gleam of light, of escape. 'I suppose,' he said, 'that you don't feel *you* could tell her, Motey?' A note of appeal, almost of anguish, thrilled in the young man's voice.

'No,' she answered decidedly. 'The telling of such things is men's work. I couldn't bring myself to do it; you don't care for her as I do, and she'll forgive you a sight quicker than she would me. I'll have to do the best I can for her afterwards.'

The furtive joy died out of Mrs. Mote's old face, and, as she turned and left the room, her dull eyes filled with reluctant tears.

V

At last the sound of wheels for which he had been listening so long fell on his ear, and hurriedly he went to fetch that which he felt should be given to his cousin without loss of time. He hoped, with a cowardly hope, that bad news, which ever travels quickly, had already met Mrs. Robinson on her way home.

Having given a brief order that they were not to be disturbed, Wantley made his way to the studio with the jewel-case in his hand. For a moment he waited just inside the door. Penelope was standing at the further end of the long room, leaning over the marble top of the high mantelpiece, writing out a telegram. She still wore a large straw hat, of which the sides, flattened down over her ears by broad black ribbons tied under the chin, framed her face, and gave a softened, old-fashioned grace to her tall, rounded figure.

As Wantley finally advanced towards her, she looked up, and her glance, her suspended writing—above all, her blue eyes full of questioning anger at the intrusion of his presence—showed him that she

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knew nothing, that the task he had so greatly dreaded lay before him.

Taking his stand by the other side of the mantel-piece, he put down the case containing her letters, and pushed it towards her. Twice he opened his lips but closed them again without speaking.

'Well,' she said shortly, as her eyes rested indifferently on the little jewel-box, 'I suppose this is something else left by Theresa Wake. It can be sent on to-morrow with the other thing, but I'll mention it in the telegram.' And she paused, as if expecting him to leave her. Indeed, her eyes, her mouth, set in stern lines, seemed to say: 'Cannot you go away, and leave me in peace? Your very presence here, unasked, in my own room, is an outrage after the way you behaved to me last night.' But she remained silent, content to wait, pencil in hand, for him to be gone, before concluding her slight task.

'Penelope,' he said at last, stung into courage by her manner and by her contemptuous glance, 'this box was not left by Miss Wake—it once belonged to Sir George Downing, and its contents are, I believe, yours.'

Again he touched the case, pushed it away from himself towards her. It slid across the polished surface of the marble to within an inch of her elbow; but, though he became aware that she stiffened into close attention, his cousin still said no word.

Her silence became to him unbearable. He walked round, and, standing close beside her, deliberately pressed the spring, and revealed what lay within.

As if she had been physically struck, Penelope suddenly drew back. 'Ah!' she said, and that was all. But in a moment her hand had closed on the little case, and she held it clasped to her, shutting out the smiling childish face which lay above the packet of her letters to Downing. So quietly, so quickly had she done this that he wondered for a moment if

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she had really seen and realized all that was lying there. 'She knows the truth,' he said to himself. 'Thank God I was mistaken—someone else has told her!'

He waited for a question, even for a cry. But none such came from the rigid figure.

'Penelope,' he said at last, and there was a note of tenderness in Wantley's voice she had never before heard in it, 'forgive me the pain I have to inflict on you. I thought that—that these things ought to be given you now, at once. I am sure you will destroy them immediately.'

At last, roughly interrupting him, she turned on him and spoke, while he listened silently, filled with increasing amazement and distress.

'Listen!' she cried, and there was no horror, no anguish, only infinite scorn and anger, in her voice. 'You ask me to forgive you. But understand that I will never forgive you! You have done an utterly unwarrantable thing. Is it possible that you really believed that any interference or effort on your part could separate two such people as Sir George Downing and myself? How little you know me! how little you can understand what the effect of such conduct as yours must be! Listen!'

She feared he was about to speak, and held up her hand. He was looking fixedly at her, still full of concern and pity, but feeling more collected and cooler before her growing excitement.

'No, listen! I am quite calm, quite reasonable; but I want you to realize what you have done—what your interference will bring about.' She paused, then continued, speaking in low, quick tones: 'I confess there was a moment last night when I wavered, when I wondered whether, after all, I was justified in only considering myself and—and—him. But now? Shall I tell you what I have made up my mind to do during the last few minutes? No—don't speak to

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me yet—I will listen with what patience I can after you have heard what I have to say. I mean to go to town to-night with Sir George Downing—I know he has not left; I know you have not yet driven him away. If necessary, I shall thrust my company upon him! Do you suppose it will be hard for me to undo with him any evil you have done?'

Again she paused, again she held up her hand to stay his words. 'If he is going to Mr. Gumberg I shall ask the old man to allow me to come there, in the character of George's'—her voice dropped, but she did not spare Wantley the word—'mistress.'

She added, with a bitter smile: 'Mr. Gumberg is a bachelor; the situation will amuse him, and give him plenty to talk about all the winter! I had meant to leave England as secretly, as quietly, as possible, out of consideration for mamma, and even for you; though I am not ashamed of what I am doing. But now, after this, I shall write and tell certain people of my intention, or, rather, of what I shall have done by the time I write; you will be sorry, you will repent then of what you have done to-day!'

He saw that she was trembling violently, and a look that crossed his face stung her afresh. 'Pray do not feel any concern for me. You will need all your pity for mamma, even a little for yourself, after to-day. But, oh!'—as her hand again closed convulsively over the case which contained her letters, her portrait—'he should not have entrusted these to you! But doubtless he could not help it—how do I know what you said to him?'

'Penelope,' he said desperately, 'you must, and you shall, listen to me! You wrong Sir George Downing, and most cruelly. How could you believe that he, alive, would have let your letters to him go out of his possession? Surely you knew him better than that!'

'I don't understand,' she said, bewildered. But

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even as she spoke he saw the mortal fear, the beginning of knowledge, coming into her face. He held out his hand, and she took it, groping her way close to him, as a blind woman might have done. 'Tell me what you mean,' she said, 'tell me quickly what you mean.'

But before he could answer there came the sound of tramping feet, of subdued voices. 'Don't look!' he cried hoarsely. 'Penelope, I beg you not to look!' But she pushed him aside, and, holding her head high, with swift, steady feet, passed out through the window to meet the little procession which was advancing slowly, painfully, across the terrace.

The burden which had just been carried up the steep steps leading from the shore was almost beyond the bearers' strength, for the broad door of the Beach Room had been taken off its hinges, and large stones from the shore held down the sheet which covered that which lay on it.

An elderly man, well known both to Penelope and to Wantley as John Purcell, the head constable of Wyke Regis, came forward to meet Mrs. Robinson. 'A terrible affair, my lady,' he observed, subdued but eager, for such an event, so interesting from his professional point of view, had never before come his way. 'I wouldn't have anything moved till I'd telegraphed for instructions; but, of course, I didn't stop thinking, and we've sent word all down the coast about that boatload his lordship saw. It's a valuable clue, I should say.'

He addressed his words to Penelope, and both he and Wantley believed her to be listening attentively to what was being said. But, after the first moment of recognition of the old constable, she no longer saw him at all, and not to save the life she then held so cheap could she have repeated what he had just said; for she was saying to herself again and again, so possessed by the misery of the thought that it left room for nothing else: 'Why did I go away to-day and

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leave him? If I had been here, if I had stayed within call of him, he would not have done this thing—he would now have been with me!’

But when Purcell dropped his voice she began to hear what he was saying. ‘Is there any place downstairs where your lordship could arrange for us to put the body? We had a hard job over those steps, and up to the poor gentleman’s room I’ve a notion they’re much worse. I’ve had to be there two or three times, sealing up everything.’ He said it in almost a whisper, but for the first time Mrs. Robinson, hearing, spoke:

‘You may take him to the Picture Room,’ she said brusquely, ‘and then you will not have to go through the hall, for the windows are very wide.’

When the signal was given for the men to move on, she first made as if she would have followed them; then, at a touch on her arm from her cousin’s hand, she turned away slowly, walking past the studio windows into the garden paths beyond. Wantley followed her, amazed, relieved, bewildered by her self-command, fearing the explanation which must now follow, and yet nervously anxious to get it behind him, while, above all, conscious of a great physical lassitude which made him long to go away and forget everything in sleep.

At last, when they were some way from the villa, close to the open down, Penelope turned to him. ‘Now tell me,’ she said, ‘tell me as quickly as you can, what I must know.’ And she waited, oppressed, while Wantley once more told the tale he had taught himself to tell, and which had been made perfect by such frequent, such frightful repetition.

For a moment she remained silent. Then, slowly and searchingly, she asked what the other felt to be a singular question: ‘Would it be better for him—I mean as to what people will say of him in the future—for it to be thought, as that foolish old man evidently

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thinks, that he was murdered, or for the truth to be known?'

'The truth?' said Wantley, looking at her, 'and what is the truth? Do you know it?'

'Yes; you and I know the truth.' Penelope's cheeks were burning; she spoke impatiently, as if angered by his dulness. 'When all that trouble came to him thirty years ago, he nearly did it; and later, another time, he thought it the only way out.'

Then Wantley understood her meaning, and the knowledge that she believed this simple, obvious explanation brought the one touch of comfort, of relief, which he had felt for many hours.

'I think,' he said at length, 'that such a thing as suicide always goes against a man's memory. Personally, I hope it will be put down to an accident. In any case, you must remember that there were many people interested in bringing about his death. I myself can testify that only recently he told me that he knew himself to be in perpetual danger.'

But Penelope was not listening. 'Now that you have told me what I wanted to know, I must ask you to do something for me.' And as he looked at her, startled, she added: 'Nothing of any great consequence. All I ask is, that you to-day, before I go back to the house, will tell Motey and my mother that I cannot, and that I will not, see them for a while. Mamma will not mind—she will understand. I know well enough that Motey betrayed me to her—I knew it the day it happened, and I felt very angry. But now nothing matters. You are to tell Motey from me that if she forces herself on me now it will be the end—I will never have her about me again!'

Penelope spoke angrily, excitedly. As she spoke she clutched her cousin's arm as if to emphasise her words. And Wantley, marvelling, turned to carry out her wish.

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CHAPTER XVIII

CHRISTIAN. But what have you seen?

MEN. Seen! Why, the Valley itself, which is as dark as pitch; we also saw there the Hobgoblins, Satyrs and Dragons of the Pit; we heard also in that Valley a continuous Howling and Yelling, as of a people under unutterable misery, who sat there bound in Affliction and Irons; and over that Valley hung the discouraging clouds of Confusion; Death also doth always spread his wings over it; in a word, it is in every whit dreadful, being utterly without Order.—BUNYAN.

I

THE last occasion on which Wantley had come to Marston Lydiate had been in order that he might be present at a great audit dinner, and he had felt acutely the unreality, the solemn absurdity, of it all. Those present, his tenants, all knew, and knew that he knew also, that he could never hope to come and live among them.

Lady Wantley, keeping up full state at the Hall, was still, as she had long been, their real overlord and Providence, and the young man had felt that it was to her that should have been addressed the heavy expressions of good will to which he had had to listen, and then to make a suitable reply.

But now, on Christmas Eve, more than a year after the death of Sir George Downing, as Wantley drove in the winter sunshine along lanes cut through land which after all belonged to him, and which must in time belong to those, yet unborn, whom he left after him, he felt something of the pride of possession stir within him, and he bethought himself that he was a link in a long human chain of worthy Wantleys, past and to come.

Sitting silent by his young wife's side, he felt well

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pleased with life, awed into thankfulness at the thought of how much better things had turned out with him than he had ever thought possible. Then a whimsical notion presented itself to his mind:

‘Why are you smiling? Do tell me!’ Cecily turned to him, rubbed her soft cheek against the pointed beard she had once—it seemed so long ago—despised as the appanage of age.

To her to-day was a great day, one to be remembered very tenderly the whole of her life through. She had read everything that could be read about this place, and, indeed, she knew far more of the history of the house to which they were going than did Wantley himself. Here also, in the substantial ivy-draped rectory, which her husband had pointed out as they had driven quickly through the village, he had been born, and spent his childhood. Oh yes, this was indeed to Cecily a day of days, and she felt pleased and moved to think that their first Christmas together should be spent at Marston Lydiate.

‘Why was I smiling? Well, when I was a child, my nurse used to say to me, “If ‘ifs’ were horses, beggars would ride!” and I was thinking just then that *if* we have a son, and *if* our son marries an American heiress, and *if* he and she care to do so, they will be able to come and live here, a thing you and I, my darling, can never do!’

The brougham swung in through the lodge gates, each flanked by a curious and, Cecily feared, a most uncomfortable little house, suggestive of a miniature Greek temple; and a turn in the wide park road, lined with snow-laden evergreen bushes, brought suddenly into view the great plateau along which stretched the long regular frontage of the huge mansion for which they were bound.

The size of the building amazed and rather excited her. ‘It must be an immense place,’ she said. ‘I had no idea that it was like this!’

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‘ Yes, the young lady will require to have a great many dollars—eh, my dear? ’

‘ You never told me it was such a—a——’

‘ Magnificent pile? ’ he suggested dryly. ‘ That is what some of my uncle’s guests used to call it. My mother’s name for it was the “ White Elephant.” Even Uncle Wantley could hardly have lived here if his wife had not been a very wealthy woman. Of course, to Penelope the essential ugliness of the place has always been very distasteful; and this perhaps is fortunate, as Marston Lydiate was the only thing my uncle possessed which he could not leave to her away from me.’

Still, he felt a thrill of pleasurable excitement when the carriage stopped beneath the large Corinthian portico; and he was touched as well as amused by the rather pompous welcome tendered by the crowd of servants, the majority of whom he had known all his life, either in their present situations or as his own village contemporaries. He was moved by the heartiness with which they greeted him and his young wife, and pleased at the discretion with which they finally vanished, leaving him and Cecily alone with the housekeeper, Mrs. Moss.

We are often assured that a servant’s life is cast in pleasant places, and each member of such a household as that of Marston Lydiate doubtless enjoys a sense of security denied to many a free man and free woman. But human nature craves for the unusual, and what can exceed the utter dulness of life below stairs when the master or mistress of such an establishment becomes old or broken in health?

Cecily would have been amused had she known of the long discussions which had taken place between Mrs. Moss, the housekeeper, and Mr. Jenkins, the butler, as to whether she or he should have the supreme pleasure and excitement of leading the couple, who were still regarded, in that house at least,

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as a bridal pair, through the ornate state-rooms to that which had been set apart and prepared for their use as the most 'cosy' of them all.

The privilege had been finally conceded to Mrs. Moss, it being admitted that, with regard to a new Lady Wantley, such was her undoubted right; and the worthy woman would have been shocked indeed had she realized that Cecily, while being conducted through the splendid rooms, each lighted up with a huge fire—the English servant's ideal of welcome—was feeling very glad that fate had not made her mistress of Marston Lydiate.

'Mr. Jenkins thought your ladyship would like tea in the Cedar Drawing-room.'

Their long progress had come to an end, and Wantley was pleased that the room chosen had always been his own favourite apartment, among many which, though not lacking in the curious pompous charm of the grand period when Marston Lydiate had been built and furnished, were yet, to his fastidious taste, overdecorated and overladen with silk and gilding.

In old days he had often wondered that Lord and Lady Wantley, themselves with so fine and austere a taste, had been content to leave, at any rate, the state-rooms of Marston Lydiate exactly as they had found them. But now, during the last few months, the young man had come face to face with facts; above all, he had been compelled to see and witness much which had made him at last understand why his predecessor had chosen other uses for his wealth than that of putting a more costly simplicity in the place of the splendour which he had inherited.

After she had ushered them with much circumstance into the pretty circular room, even now full of the distinct faint fragrance thrown out by the cedar panelling from which it took its name, Mrs. Moss still lingered.

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‘Your lordship will find her ladyship very poorly,’ she said nervously. ‘I know you’ve heard from Dr. Knox; he said he was writing to you. I do wish our young lady would come home. She writes to her mamma very regularly, that I will say; but it’s my belief that her ladyship’s just pining to death for her.’

‘You’ve been having trouble with the nurses?’ Wantley spoke with a certain effort. He had not shown his wife the country doctor’s letter to himself.

Mrs. Moss tossed her head. ‘That we have indeed! They don’t like chronic cases. That’s what they all say. I don’t know what young women are coming to! Wait till they’re chronic cases themselves! The night nurse left this morning. I don’t know, I’m sure, what we shall do about to-night.’

Wantley checked the torrent of words. ‘We will arrange about that, you and I, later. Do you think my aunt would like to see me now, at once?’

Mrs. Moss shook her head. ‘One time’s the same to her as another,’ she said, sighing, and left the room.

II

During the last year, crowded as it had been to himself with events of great moment, Wantley had yet thought much of Penelope’s mother. The knowledge of what she had done, though hidden away in the most secret recess of his mind and memory had yet inspired him, as time went on, with an increasing feeling of fear and repulsion.

His recollection of all that had happened at Monk’s Eype remained so vivid that sometimes he would seem to go again through some of the worst moments of the dreadful day, which, as he remembered it, had begun with his strange interview with Lady Wantley.

For many weeks—ay, and even months—he had lived in acute apprehension of what each hour might bring forth; and even when the passage of time had gradu-

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ally brought a sense of security, when great happiness and, for the first time in his life, daily work of a real and strenuous nature had come together to fill his thoughts and chase forth morbid terror of an untoward revelation, he had heard with actual relief that Lady Wantley was very ill, and likely to die.

Very unwillingly he had brought Cecily with him to Marston Lydiate. But he had found it impossible to give any adequate reason why she should be left to spend a lonely Christmas in London; further, she had expressed, with more strength than was usual with her, a desire to accompany him, and he had been surprised at the warm affection with which she had spoken of Penelope's mother.

He was quite determined that his own first meeting with Lady Wantley should take place alone; and so at last, when he felt the moment he dreaded could no longer be postponed, Cecily had to submit to being placed on a sofa, and left, wondering, perplexed, even a little hurt, while Wantley, guided by Mrs. Moss, went to face an ordeal which his wife actually envied him.

So little really intimate had been the Hall with the Rectory in the days of Wantley's childhood and boyhood, that there were many rooms of the vast eighteenth-century mansion which now belonged to him into which he had never been led as child and boy. And it was with a certain surprise that he became aware, when standing on its threshold, that Lady Wantley's bedroom was situated over the round Cedar Drawing-room, and so was of exactly the same proportions, though the general impression produced by the colouring and furnishing was amazingly other.

Long before they became the fashion, Lady Wantley had realized the beauty and the value of white backgrounds, and no touch of colour, save that provided by the fine old furniture, marred the delicate purity and

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severity of an apartment where, even as a young woman, she had spent much of her time when at Marston Lydiate.

In this moment of profound emotion and of fear, Wantley's mind and eyes yet took delight in the restful whiteness which from the very threshold seemed to envelop him.

The small bed, shrouded tent-wise with white curtains, concealed from him, but only for an instant, the sole occupant of the circular room; for suddenly he saw, sitting in a large armchair placed close to the fire, a strange shrunken figure, wrapped and swathed in black from head to foot. Even the white coif which had always formed part of Lady Wantley's costume since her widowhood had been put aside for a scarf of black silk, so arranged as to hide the upper part of the broad forehead, while accentuating the attenuation of the hollow cheeks, the sunken eyes, and the still delicately modelled nose and chin.

As he gazed, horror-struck, at the sinister-looking figure, by whose side, heaped up in confusion on a small table, lay numberless packets of letters, some yellow with the passage of time, others evidently written very lately, Wantley's repugnance became merged in great concern and pity.

'If your lordship will excuse me, I don't think I'll go up close to her,' Mrs. Moss whispered. 'Her ladyship don't seem to care to see me ever now,' and she slipped away, shutting the door softly behind her, and so leaving him alone with this strange and, it seemed to him, almost unreal presence.

Slowly he went up and stood before her, and as he murmured words of greeting, and regret that he found her so ailing, he took hold of the thin, fleshless right hand, to feel startled surprise at the strength of its burning grasp.

Looking down into the wan face, meeting the still penetrating grey eyes, Wantley saw with relief that,

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at this moment at any rate, she had full possession of her mind; for the despair he saw there was a sane despair, and one that told of sentient endurance.

'I see you have come alone,' she said at last in a low, clear, collected tone. 'You have not brought your wife? But I could not have expected you to do otherwise, knowing what you know.'

'Cecily is here. Of course she came with me,' he answered quickly. 'She is now lying down, the long journey tired her, and I felt sure you would like her to rest before seeing you.'

'Does she *know*?' asked Lady Wantley slowly, searchingly.

'Oh no!' he said, in almost a whisper, and glancing apprehensively round the room as he did so, but only to be made aware that they were indeed alone.

Then, very deliberately, the young man drew up a chair close to hers. 'Has not the time now come when you should try and forget? Surely you should try and put the past out of your mind, if only for Penelope's sake?'

'Ah,' she said very plaintively, 'but I cannot forget! I am not allowed to do so. When I lie down I say, "When shall I arise and the night be gone?" And I am full of tossings to and fro unto the dawning of the day.'

'Yet you felt justified in your action—above all, you did save Penelope,' he urged in a low tone.

But Lady Wantley turned on him a look of anguish and perplexity.

'Surely,' he added earnestly, 'surely you do not allow yourself to doubt that Penelope was saved—and saved, I am convinced, from what would have been a frightful fate, by your action?'

'I do not know,' she said feebly. 'Part of my punishment has been the doubt, the awful doubt, as to whether we were justified in our fears. If I gave my soul for hers, I am more than content to be marked

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with the mark of the Beast. For, Ludovic, they that dwell in mine house and my maids count me for a stranger; I am an alien in their sight.'

Her words, their hopelessness, moved him to great pity. 'Why did you not ask us to come before?' he asked. 'We would have done so willingly, and then you would not have felt so sadly lonely.'

Lady Wantley looked at him fixedly. 'If they, my father and my husband, have forsaken me,' she said slowly, 'I am not fit for other company. In my great distress, in my extreme abasement, only my mother has remained faithful; she alone has had the courage to descend with me into the Pit. My kinsfolk have failed and my familiar friends have forgotten me. You know—you remember, Ludovic, that he—my husband, I mean—never left me. For nearly fifty years we were together, inseparable—forty years in the flesh, ten years in the spirit; where he went I followed; where I chose to go he accompanied me, and guarded me from trouble. But now,' she said—and, oh! so woefully—'I have not felt his presence, or heard his voice, for upwards of a year.'

Wantley got up: he turned away, and, walking to the great bay-window, looked out on the darkening, snow-bound landscape.

This stretching out, this appeal of her soul, as it were, to his, moved him as might have done the intolerable sight of some poor creature enduring the extremity of physical torment.

Again he came to her, again took her thin, burning hand in his, and then, murmuring something of his wife, abruptly left her.

III

Cecily was still lying on the sofa where he had placed her. The fire alone lighted up the fine old luxurious room, softening the bright green of the damask

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curtains, bathing the low gilt couch and the figure lying on it in rosy light.

With a gesture most unusual with him, Wantley flung himself on his knees by his wife: he gathered her head and shoulders in his arms, pressed the soft hair off her forehead, and kissed her with an almost painful emotion. 'You will find her very altered,' he said hoarsely; 'I wonder if I ought to let you see her. I'm afraid you will be distressed, and I cannot let you be distressed just now!'

'Has she been too much left alone? Oh, Ludovic, I wish we had come before! Perhaps the nurse—the woman who has just left—was not kind to her.'

Cecily was starting up, but he held her back, exceedingly perplexed as to what to do and what to say. 'No,' he said at last; and then, carefully choosing his words, 'She did not speak of the nurse, and I do not suppose that any one has been outwardly disrespectful or unkind to her. But, dearest, before you go up to her, I think you should be prepared to find her in a very pitiful state. I dare say you've forgotten once speaking to me at Monk's Eype concerning her belief that she was in close communication with the dead whom she loved? Well, now she unhappily believes that her husband has forsaken her, that his spirit no longer holds communication with hers.' Wantley's voice broke. 'To hear her talk of it, of her agony and loneliness, is horribly sad; and although I do not actually believe that my uncle was, as she says, always with her, I could not help thinking of ourselves—of how I should feel, my darling, if you were to turn from me.'

'But,' said Cecily, clinging to him, 'I could never, never turn from you!'

'Ah! but so Uncle Wantley would once have said to her. You never saw him; you do not know, as I do, in what an atmosphere of devotion—it might almost be said of adoration—he always surrounded her. I

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don't wonder,' he added, 'that she felt it endure even after his death.'

'But why does she think he has turned from her?' asked Cecily, perplexed.

Wantley hesitated. 'She believes,' he answered reluctantly, 'that she has done something which has utterly alienated him. But we must try and keep her from the whole subject, and perhaps—indeed, I hope—she will not speak to you as freely as she did to me.'

Hand in hand they went through the great ground-floor rooms, up the broad staircase, and down vast corridors.

At the door of Lady Wantley's room he turned to Cecily. 'Promise me,' he said rather sternly, 'that if I make you a sign—if I say "Go"—you will leave us. It is not right that you should be made ill, or that you should be overdistressed.' And as he spoke there was in his voice a note new to her—a tone which said very clearly that he meant to be obeyed.

Wantley hung back as Cecily, treading softly, walked forward into the room of which the white dimness had been accentuated by two candles which had been lighted close to where Lady Wantley was sitting.

Suddenly, as the older woman stood up, uttering a curious, yearning cry of welcome which thrilled through the passive spectator, the younger woman ran forward, and took the shrunken, shrouded figure in her arms—soft arms, which were at once so maternal and so childish in contour.

Then the one standing aside felt a curious feeling come over him. Sometimes it seemed as if he shared his wife with the whole of the suffering half of the world.

Silently he watched Cecily place Lady Wantley back in her chair, and then, kneeling down by her, first kiss, and then take between her warm young palms, the other's trembling hands. He heard his

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wife's words: 'We are ashamed of not having come before, of having left you to be lonely here; but now we will stay as long as you will have us, and I am sure you will be better, perhaps quite well again, by the time Penelope comes home!'

'Is Ludovic here?' Lady Wantley asked suddenly. And as he came forward, 'Are there not candles,' she asked him—'candles which should be lit?'

'Yes,' he answered, looking round with some surprise. 'There are a great number of candles about your room—all unlit, of course.'

'Unlit?' she repeated; 'unlit as yet, for till now I feared the light. When I said "My bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint," then I was scared by dreams and terrified through visions.'

'But now,' whispered Cecily earnestly, 'you will no longer be so sadly lonely; we will see that you are not left alone.'

'I am no longer lonely or alone,' said Lady Wantley mysteriously. 'That is why,' she added, looking at the young man standing before her—'that is why I must ask you, Ludovic, to go round my room and give light; for the bridegroom cometh, and must not find me in the dark.'

Wondering at her words, he obeyed, and a few moments later they left her, the centre of a circle of glimmering lights.

IV

It was night. In the dimly-lighted corridor Wantley stood holding a short colloquy with the maid who tended Lady Wantley throughout the day. 'There's nothing to do but sit by quietly,' the woman spoke wearily. 'Her ladyship never speaks all night; but she won't be left alone a minute.'

Entering the room, he hoped to find her asleep, for he still felt strangely unfamiliar with the thin, worn

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face and strange, distraught-looking eyes. There had always been something ample about Lady Wantley's presence, especially a great dignity of demeanour; but the long months of mental agony had betrayed her, and he wondered that those about her had not divined her fear, and asked themselves of what she was afraid.

Wantley had been terribly moved by the tragic melancholy of their first meeting, infinitely touched by her cry of welcome to his young wife; but he felt oppressed at the thought of his lonely vigil, and as he sat down by the fire with a book, he hoped most fervently that she would sleep, or remain, as he was told she always had done with the nurse whose place he was now filling, mutinously silent.

But he had scarcely read the first words of the story to whose familiar charm he trusted to make him for the moment forget, when Lady Wantley's voice came clearly across the room. 'Cecily,' he said to himself, 'has indeed worked wonders;' for the words were uttered naturally, almost as the speaker might have spoken them in the old days when all was well with her.

'I want to know'—and the words seemed to float towards him—'about you and Cecily. I cannot tell you, Ludovic, how happy it makes me to think that this dear child shares my name with me! I learnt to love her during those days—before——' Her voice faltered.

Wantley quickly laid down 'Persuasion.' He rose and went over to the bed, drew up a chair, and very tenderly and quietly took one of the thin hands lying across the counterpane in his. 'Yes, let me tell you all about ourselves,' he said quickly, forcing a light note into his voice. 'After our marriage—such a queer, quiet wedding——'

'Was Penelope there? I can't remember.'

'No, no! Penelope had already started on her

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travels. Just then I think she was in Japan.' He went on, speaking quickly, hardly knowing what he was saying. 'Well, Cecily had had a hard time at the Settlement—in fact, she was really quite tired out—so, to the great horror of Miss Wake, who had never heard of such a thing being done before, I took her the day we were married down to Brighton, although several people, including a brother of Miss Theresa's, offered us country-houses. In a sense we spent our honeymoon at Cecily's old convent, for we went out there almost every day. I got on splendidly with the nuns, especially with the one whom I suppose one would call the Mother Abbess. Such a woman, such a type! One of Napoleon's field-m Marshals in petticoats—knowing exactly what she wanted, and making the people round her do it.'

Wantley paused a moment, then went on: 'After three weeks of Brighton, this determined old lady made me take my wife to France, to Versailles. "*Là vous l'aimerez bien, et vous la distrairez beaucoup!*" she commanded; and of course I obeyed.'

There was a pause. 'And then you went on to Monk's Eype?' Lady Wantley raised herself on her pillows; she looked at him searchingly, but he avoided meeting her eyes. 'I felt surprised to hear of your going there,' she said, and the hand he was still holding trembled in his grasp.

'I was surprised to find myself going there'—Wantley spoke very slowly, very reluctantly—'but Cecily loves the place, and you would not have had me sell it, just after Penelope had so very generously given it over to us?'

'Oh no!' she said. And then again, 'Oh no! I did not mean that, Ludovic.'

'I have had the Beach Room taken away,' he said, almost in a whisper. 'It is entirely obliterated'; and then, trying again to speak more naturally: 'We had Philip Hammond with us part of the time; and also

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others of Cecily's Stratford friends, including one poor fellow who had never had more than two days' holiday in his life since he first began working! And then I want to tell you '—he was eager to get away from Monk's Eype—'about our life in town, and the sort of existence we had made for ourselves.'

Lady Wantley, for the first time, smiled. 'I know,' she said; 'people—acquaintances, and old fellow-workers of your uncle—have written to me full of joy.'

Wantley made a slight grimace. 'Well,' he observed rather shamefacedly, 'I have had to take to it all, if only in self-defence; otherwise I should never see anything of my own wife. Even as it is, I have offended a good many people, especially lately, by my determination that she shall not join any more committees or undertake any new work. Cecily is quite bewildered to find what a number of admirable folk there are in the world!'

Lady Wantley again smiled. 'But I do not suppose,' she said, 'that Cecily finds among them many like herself. I have sometimes thought of how well your uncle would have liked her.'

Pope and all?' Wantley smiled. For the first time he allowed his eyes frankly to meet hers.

'Yes, yes!' she cried with something of her old eagerness; 'he always knew and recognized goodness when he saw it. And, Ludovic, you know what I told you to-day—of my awful loneliness, of my desolation of body and spirit?' Wantley looked at her uneasily. 'Even as I spoke to you,' she said, 'my punishment was being remitted, my solitude blessedly invaded—for he, the husband of my youth, my companion and helper, was returning, to help me across the passage.'

A feeling, not so much of astonishment, as of awe and fear came over Wantley. His eyes sought the dim grey shadows, out of which he half expected to

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see force itself the figure of the man he had never wholly liked, or even wholly respected, but whom he had always greatly feared.

‘He came back with Cecily,’ Lady Wantley added, after a long pause. ‘Her purity has blotted out my iniquity.’

‘And do you actually see him now? Are you aware of his presence?’

Wantley in a sense felt that on her answer would depend what he himself would see, and as he waited he felt increasingly afraid; but, ‘To know that he is there is all I ask,’ she said slowly; ‘to be able to tell him everything is the sum of my desire, and this I can now do;’ and, lying back on her high pillows, she sank into silence and sleep.

CHAPTER XIX

‘On chiding women that are forlorn,
And men that sweat in nothing but scorn—
That is, on all that ever were born—
Miserere, Domine.’

H. B.

I

THE next morning poor Cecily felt strangely forlorn. Somehow, this did not seem like Christmas Day. Wantley, haggard, but smiling, after his long night’s vigil, had declared that the state of the roads made it out of the question that they should drive the six miles to the nearest Catholic church, and she had submitted without a word, only insisting that he should have some hours of sleep.

And then, after having knelt down by the fire in the spacious room which had been prepared for her, when she had read the service of the Mass and said

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her rosary, she sent a message to Lady Wantley asking if she could come to her.

The mistress of Marston Lydiate was still in bed, and in the wintry morning light Cecily saw with a pang how aged and how ailing her old friend had become, but the look of intolerable distress and terror had gone from the pale, delicate face.

‘Do you know, my dear, what day this is—I mean, what day this is to me?’

‘Yes,’ said Cecily, smiling: ‘I know that it is Penelope’s birthday, as well as Christmas Day.’

Lady Wantley raised herself in bed. She put her arms round the younger woman and kissed her. ‘I know how it is with you,’ she whispered, ‘and, oh, I am so glad! Do you know how long I myself had to wait?’ And then, receiving no answer, she added: ‘Nineteen years! That was the only shadow on my singularly happy, blessed life; but it was a shadow which sometimes darkened everything. I only once spoke to him—to my husband, I mean—on the matter, for in those days we women seldom spoke of our feelings. I had been ill, some trifling ailment, and he came and sat by me in this room, just where you are sitting now, and suddenly I told him of my longing for a child. I was foolish and repining, alas! for you must know, my dear, that I grieved for his sake as well as for my own. I have often thought, this last year, lying here, of what he answered. He looked at me so kindly. “Am I not more to thee than ten sons?” he asked; and I felt infinitely comforted.

‘And then’—Cecily spoke softly—‘Penelope was born?’

‘Ah no, not then!’ said Lady Wantley, with the literalness which sometimes suddenly came to her. ‘Many years had to go by first. But when she came it was on Christmas morning.’ She shaded her eyes with her left hand. ‘Not a day like this,’ she

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whispered. 'It was a warm, sunny, green Christmas that year; I remember it all so well. Ludovic's mother came up to see me after church. You know we were never really intimate; I fear she did not like me. But she was very kind that day. All women feel in sympathy with one another on such days, and Mrs. Wantley's love for her own son made her know what my daughter would be to me.' Lady Wantley hesitated, and then, as if speaking to herself, added: 'How often I have looked at my beloved child—my beautiful gifted Penelope—and prayed God to comfort childless women.' Then suddenly the speaker's face contracted, and she looked at Cecily as if wishing to compel her to speak truly. 'Is it well with my child?' she asked. 'Tell me what you think, what you know of her? I know you love her dearly.'

'I know nothing, and cannot tell what to think.' The answer was slow, reluctant, and truthful.

Lady Wantley turned and searched under her pillow. Silently she handed Cecily a letter, wistfully watched her read it. 'Doubtless she writes more fully to you, her friend, than to me, her mother,' she said at last; but Cecily remained silent while glancing perplexed, over the short, dry, though not unaffectionate note. 'There is a postscript on the other side of the sheet. Perhaps you knew already that David Winfrith was with her?'

On the last sheet of foreign note-paper were written in Mrs. Robinson's clear, pointed handwriting the words: 'David Winfrith is in Bombay. He is coming up to see me in a few days.'

'We acted very wrongly,' said Lady Wantley, in a low tone. 'He—my husband—now knows that we were not rightly guided in the matter. We were swayed by considerations of no real moment. She loved David then; she was very steadfast. It was he who gave way. Lord Wantley sent for him and made him withdraw his offer. Do you think that

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now—— Ah, Cecily, if I could only hope to leave Penelope in so safe a haven!'

Cecily's lips quivered. Not even to comfort her old friend could she, or would she, say what she believed to be false. To her simple heart such love as that once avowed to herself by Penelope for Downing could not change or die away. It might be thrust back out of sight at the call of conscience, but the void could never be filled by another man.

David Winfrith? Why, Penelope had often laughed at him in the old happy days when she, Cecily, was first at the Settlement. Oh no! David Winfrith might follow Mrs. Robinson all over the world, but Penelope would ever keep outside the haven offered by him, if, indeed—and again a flash of remembrance crossed her mind—such haven was still open to her.

She could say nothing comfortable, and so kept silent, but her troubled look answered for her. Lady Wantley drew a long, sharp breath. 'I cannot hope,' she muttered, 'to be wholly forgiven.'

II

There are certain days and festivals when every association of the heart confirms the truth of the old saying that any company is better than none. So felt Wantley and Cecily sitting down to their lonely Christmas dinner—or lunch, as Mr. Jenkins more genteelly put it—in the vast dining-room, where, as the same authority assured Cecily, 'fifty could sit down easy.'

Had these two not been at Marston Lydiate, they would now have been at the Settlement, Wantley doubtless grumbling, man-like, to himself because he was not spending Christmas Day alone, by his own fireside, with his own wife. But to-day even he felt the silence of the great house oppressive, and early in the afternoon he assented with eagerness to

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Cecily's proposal that they should walk down to the village and see the church where, as she reminded him, he had been baptized.

Mrs. Moss, the housekeeper, and Mr. Jenkins, the butler, standing together by the window in the butler's pantry—which was from their point of view most agreeably situated, for it commanded the entrance to the house—watched the young couple set off from under the portico.

They were talking together rather eagerly, Cecily flushed and smiling. 'It's easy to see they have not long been married,' said the housekeeper with a soft sigh. 'Still plenty to say, I expect.'

But young Lady Wantley was shaking her head, and as she and her husband passed on their way, within but a few feet of the window behind which stood the couple who were looking at them with such affectionate interest, she exclaimed rather loudly: 'Oh, Ludovic, how can you say such a thing! I don't agree with you at all!'

'Ho, ho, a tiff!' whispered Mr. Jenkins with gloomy satisfaction; but Mrs. Moss turned on him very sharply.

'Stuff and nonsense!' she said; 'that's only to show she's not his slave. Why, that girl Charlotte Pidder—her ladyship's lady's-maid I suppose she fancies herself to be, though, from what I can make out, she can't neither do hairdressing nor dressmaking—was telling me this morning that they fairly dote on one another. There now, look at them! There's a pretty sight for you!'


The walkers had come to a standstill, and Wantley taking his wife's hand, was trying to put it through his arm. 'I will not touch your sacred idol!' the eavesdroppers heard him say, 'In future I will always keep my real thoughts to myself.'

'Well, of all things! If the old lord could only hear them!' whispered Mrs. Moss, now really scanda-

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lized. 'It do seem a pity that such a nice young lady should be a Papist, and should try and make him a worshipper of idols, too.' And she turned away, for the two outside had quickened their steps, and were no longer within earshot.

Cecily was still indignant. 'I only wish,' she said, her voice trembling a little, 'that you were right and I wrong. If only Penelope would marry Mr. Winfrith, and live happy ever after——'

'I did not promise you that,' said Wantley mildly, 'though, mind you, I think she would have a better chance with him than with anyone else.' 

'But why should she marry at all?' cried Cecily. 'I quite understand why her mother would like her to do so, but surely, after all that happened——'

Wantley shot a keen glance at his companion. 'Wonderful,' he murmured, 'the effect of even one night's good country air! You look much better, and even prettier, that you did yesterday.'

Cecily smiled. Praise from him always sounded very sweetly in her ear, but, 'No, no!' she said, 'I won't let you off! Tell me why Penelope is not to remain as she is if she wishes to do so?'

'There are a hundred reasons, with most of which I certainly shall not trouble you; but the best of them all is that, however much she wishes it, she will not be able to do so.'

'And pray, why not?' asked Cecily.

'If Winfrith doesn't succeed in carrying her off, someone infinitely less worthy certainly will, and then all our troubles will begin again. Don't you see—or is it, as I sometimes suspect, that you won't see?'—his voice suddenly grew grave—'that Penelope is never content, never even approximately happy, unless she is'—he hesitated, then went on, avoiding as he spoke the candid eyes lifted up to his in such eager, perplexed inquiry—'well, unless she has some man, or, better still, several men, in play?'

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Now, that sort of game—oh! but I mean it: with her it has always been a game, and a game only becomes absorbing and exciting when there is present the element of danger—generally ends in disaster.’

Cecily walked on in silence. ‘I admit there is some truth in what you say,’ she said at last; ‘but I am sure, *sure*, Ludovic, that you are wrong about Mr. Winfrith.’

Wantley looked at her thoughtfully. ‘A bet, a little bet, my dearest, is a very good way of proving the faith that is in you. Here and now I propose that, if I prove right and you prove wrong after, let us say, two years—’

‘Please—please,’ she said, ‘do not make a joke of this matter; it hurts me.’

‘Forgive me,’ he cried repentantly. ‘I am rather light-headed to-day, and you know I always feel rather jealous of Penelope. After all that’s come and gone, it’s rather hard that she should take also my wife from me!’

III

Of the many ill things done in the name of beauty during the last hundred years, none, surely, can compare in sheer wantonness with the restorations of our old village churches. In this matter pious iconoclasts have wrought more mischief than Cromwell and his Ironsides ever succeeded in doing, and the lover of rural England, in the course of his pilgrimage, has perpetually thrust on his notice the loveliness without, wedded to the plaintive ugliness within, of buildings raised to the glory of God in a more creative as well as in a holier age than ours.

Here and there, becoming, however, pitifully few as time goes on, the seeker may even now find a village church to the interior of which no desecration has as yet been offered. But such survivals owe their temporary lease of life either to the happy indiffer-

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ence of a wise neighbourhood, or to the determined eccentricity and obstinate conservatism of an incumbent happening to be on intimate terms of friendship—or enmity will serve as well—with the patron of the living.

Such had been the fortunate case of the parish church of Marston Lydiate, and Wantley felt a thrill of pleasure when he saw how completely untouched everything had been left since the distant days of his childhood.

Together he and his wife made their way among the square old-fashioned pews, first to one and then to another of the holly-decked tombs and monuments of long-dead Wantleys. At last the young man led Cecily up to the most ancient, as also to the most ornate, of these, one taking up the greater part of one aisle.

The monument represented Sir George Wantley, of Marston Lydiate, Knight, who in the year 1609 had rebuilt the church. His effigy in armour, bare-headed and kneeling, was under a pillared canopy, and at some little distance was the statue of his wife under a similar canopy. The inscription set forth that their married life, if brief, had been unclouded by dissension, and that 'His lady, left alone, lived alone,' till, having attained her eightieth year, 'she was again joined unto her husband in this place.'

'So,' said Wantley, very soberly, 'would you wish our poor Penelope to be. She has been left alone, and now you would condemn her to live alone.'

But Cecily made no answer. She only looked very kindly at the stiff figure of the steadfast dame whose name she now herself bore, and whose conduct she so thoroughly understood and approved.

As they walked through the church gate, a boy came running up breathless. He held a telegram in his hand, and began, in the native dialect, an involved explanation as to why it had not been delivered before.

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'Oh, it's addressed to you,' said Wantley, handing it to his wife.

Cecily opened it. 'I don't understand,' she began, but he saw her cheeks turn bright pink. 'I don't think it can be meant for me at all.'

Wantley looked over her shoulder. 'It certainly is not meant for you,' he said dryly.

The message, which had been sent from Simla, consisted in the words:

'Penelope and I were married to-day by Arch-deacon of Lahore. Please have proper announcement put in *Times*.—Your affectionate son, DAVID WINFRITH.'

Wantley and Cecily looked at one another in silence. Then, fumbling about in his pocket, the young man finally handed the astonished and gratified boy half a sovereign. 'It's fair that someone should win the bet,' he said, with a queer whimsical smile, and then, after the recipient of his bounty had gone off, he added: 'Well, Cecily?'

'You are always right, and I am always wrong,' she cried, half laughing, and yet her eyes filling with tears. 'But, oh! do let us hurry back and give this to Lady Wantley. I shall have to explain to her how stupid it was of me to open it.'

They walked along in almost complete silence, till suddenly Wantley said musingly: 'I wonder how much David Winfrith knows—I wonder if she has told him——'

But Cecily looked up at him very reproachfully, and as if she herself were being accused—of what? 'There was very little to know,' she said vehemently, 'and very, very little to tell.'

'If you make half as good a wife as you are friend,' exclaimed Wantley, 'I shall be more than content.'



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LOWNDES, MRS BELLOC

THE HEART OF PENELOPE.

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